

THE COLLECTED PLAYS OF
W SOMERSET MAUGHAM

VOL II

LIZA OF LAMBETH
 MRS CRADDOCK
 THE MERRY-GO-ROUND
 THE EXPLORER
 THE MAGICIAN
 THE MOON AND SIXPENCE
 OF HUMAN BONDAGE
 THE TREMBLING OF A LEAF
 ON A CHINESE SCREEN
 THE PAINTED VEIL
 THE CASUARINA TREE
 ASHENDEN
 THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOUR
 CAKES AND ALE
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 AH KING
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 CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY
 THE MIXTURE AS BEFORE
 BOOKS AND YOU
 UP AT THE VILLA
 STRICTLY PERSONAL
 THE RAZOR'S EDGE
 THEN AND NOW
 HERE AND THERE (*Collection of Short Stories*)
 CREATURES OF CIRCUMSTANCE
 CATALINA
 QUARTET (*Four Short Stories with Film Scripts*)
 TRIO (*Three Short Stories with Film Scripts*)
 ENCORE (*Three Short Stories with Film Scripts*)
 A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK
 THE COMPLETE SHORT STORIES (3 Vols)
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 THE PARTIAL VIEW
 TEN NOVELS AND THEIR AUTHORS

The Collected Plays

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THE COLLECTED ❖ PLAYS ❖

of

W. SOMERSET
MAUGHAM

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OUR BETTERS

THE UNATTAINABLE

HOME AND BEAUTY

THE CIRCLE

THE CONSTANT WIFE

THE BREADWINNER

PREFACE

THE three plays following are placed in the order in which they were written. *Our Betters*, though it was not acted in London till 1923, and then only with a scene at the end of the second act altered to suit the exigencies of the Lord Chamberlain, was written in Rome at the beginning of 1915. When at last it was produced I extracted a certain amount of discreet amusement from such of the critics as found in it a development of characteristics that they had discovered in plays produced before but written much later. I may add in passing that in this edition I have reverted to my original version. It was more probable and I do not see that it was more shocking. In the few years that have passed audiences have become used to greater frankness, and if the play were ever revived I have little doubt that the word *slut* used by one of the characters, which made the spectators on the first night gasp with horror, would now fail entirely to express the speaker's indignation. *The Unattainable* was produced under the name of *Caroline*, and it gave Irene Vanbrugh the opportunity for one of the best performances of her distinguished career. I had a somewhat unusual experience with this play. I wrote it in Geneva during the autumn of 1915. It was engaged in work for the Intelligence Department which the Swiss authorities did not approve of, and my predecessor had had a nervous breakdown owing to the strain it put upon his temperament, more sensitive than mine, to break the law, my colleague at Lausanne had lately been sent to prison for two years. I did not know how political prisoners were treated and I had no notion whether, should such an unpleasant fate befall me, I should be allowed pens and paper. I hated the idea of leaving the play unfinished, and I knew it would be very difficult to take it up again after a long interval. It was a great relief

to me when I wrote the last line I sent it to London, and it was put into rehearsal at once I had written the whole play up to a great comic scene in the last act, a scene of mistaken identity in the classic manner, which in imagination had very much amused me, and, indeed, it was on my exuberant description of this scene that Irene Vanbrugh had accepted the play I managed to get a few days' leave and went to London for the final rehearsals The date was fixed for production Things were very well advanced The caste was word-perfect I sat through the first two acts and was not dissatisfied, the play seemed to have come through very much as I had seen it in my mind's eye, but I was awaiting the scene which I expected to prove the climax of the comedy A very good actor, George Tully, had been engaged to play in it The persons concerned started They went through it and they acted it very well To my dismay I discovered that it did not amuse me at all Here was a pretty kettle of fish! It took up two-thirds of the last act, and it was to lead up to it that the first two acts had been devised It seemed to me that there was but one thing to do I waited till the rehearsal was finished and then, telling Dion Boucicault, who was producing it, that this would not do at all, asked him to give me twenty-four hours, took the script home and rewrote the last act I left out the scene that had so much disappointed me, and with it the character that George Tully was to act The play now offered to the reader is the result I do not know that it is an author's business to point out to his readers the defects of his work, but if I were a critic I should perhaps feel it my duty to make the observation that the play really is finished by the end of the first act What follows might have very well been left to the imagination of the audience

The same stern critic might make the same objection to *Home and Beauty*, the third play in this volume, and in each case the answer might be given, in extenuation, that a certain number of diverting scenes do what is possible to atone for the failure to adhere to the strict canons of drama

Home and Beauty was written in a sanatorium during the last winter of the war. I had escaped a Swiss prison, but the work I was engaged in had much exposed me to the rigours of a singularly bad winter and I had contracted tuberculosis of the lungs. This had been aggravated by a sojourn in Russia, and when on the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks I was obliged to come back to England, I was feeling very sorry for myself. It was impossible then to go to Davos or St. Moritz, so I went to Scotland. It was a very pleasant life at Nordrach-on-Dee. I was sent to bed every day at six o'clock, and an early dinner gave me a long evening to myself. The cold, windless night entered the room through the wide-open windows, and with mittens on my hands so that I could comfortably hold a pen, it was an admirable opportunity to write a farce. For *Home and Beauty* pretends to be no more. I never had an opportunity of seeing it, but I believe it made people laugh very much. Some of the critics called it cruel and heartless. I should not have thought it was. It was written in the highest possible spirits. It was intended to amuse.

So, for the matter of that, where the other two plays. The reader of the previous preface to this edition of my plays will not be surprised at my confession that I think this is the business of a comedy. To my mind it is not a work of edification, though it should be a work of art, and if it castigates the follies of the moment that is by the way and only in so far as this no doubt laudable process occasions laughter. The object is the entertainment of the audience, not their improvement.

I am conscious that my plays are classed by the learned who write books on the drama and contribute articles to encyclopædias as commercial theatre, and it is true that on the whole the managers have made money out of them and I have kept the wolf some distance from my door.

The difficulty of the drama as an art lies for the most part in its dependence on the audience. An audience is a crowd and art as we know has nothing to do with the multitude.

The working classes, absorbed in the daily effort of providing for the needs of the body, have little energy left over to cultivate the disinterested emotions of art. The upper classes know nothing of it and care less. They feign sometimes an interest in it when fashion suggests such a pose as a social distinction. Great ladies then cultivate those occupied with the arts as in former times they kept buffoons. An interest in art is found, if in any class at all, most commonly perhaps in the middle ranks of society. A German observer of this country has stated that it is almost exclusively confined to the northern and western suburbs of London. Even here it must be rare, for it needs not only a natural instinct, which is uncommon, but an elaborate cultivation. That the two are necessary is shown by the fact that a true feeling for one of the arts by no means entails feeling for the others: a man may have admirable taste in pictures and none at all in literature or music. The appeal of the arts then is to the very few.

But the drama cannot do with that. It must address itself equally to the working man in the gallery and to the gilded youth in the stalls. It must interest the stock-jobber who reads nothing but *The Financial Times* and the elderly spinster whose soul is sweet with memories of Italy and Greece. Attempts have been made from time to time to separate the various classes of playgoers. It has been suggested that certain plays should be written with the idea of attracting a limited, intellectual section, rather than the public at large, but the attempts have failed, as indeed an elementary acquaintance with the philosophy of the subject would have shown was inevitable, and the difficulty still remains to move, amuse and entertain an audience composed of persons with every variety of education and intelligence. It would be impossible if the audience consisted simply of the aggregation of individuals, but the play forms it into a distinct organism with characteristics peculiar to itself. It seems obvious that the audience is as much part of the play as the words and their interpreters. I read once a French

criticism in which the theory was advanced that the reading of a play was the only test of its merit on the stage one was influenced by the skill of the actors, the elaborateness of the setting and the emotions of one's fellow spectators. I think this is nonsense. The play that is read differs not at all from that monstrous product, once fashionable, the novel in dialogue. A play exists without an audience as little as a colour without a spectator. If plays have maintained through the many centuries since the drama arose "in a rude and unpremeditated manner" from the worship of Dionysus, certain main traits, it is owing not to the imitativeness of the dramatists, but to the unaltered characteristics of the crowd. I do not know if the psychology of the audience is capable of change, but it is clear from the most casual study of dramatic works since Æschylus that no great change has taken place in it hitherto.

The audience has a collective soul. It feels, reacts, and thinks differently from what each member of it, taken separately, would do. It is emotional rather than intellectual, and this gives it homogeneity, for however unlike men are by their intelligence, their passions are the same. The audience is on a lower level of civilisation than the persons of which it is composed, and it may be for this reason that the theatre is a generation behind the culture of the age. The opinions, ideas and beliefs which are suggested to an audience are accepted or rejected in the mass, uncritically, and are considered either as absolute truths or as absolute errors. An audience can only receive ideas when they are placed before it in their simplest form, and even then only when they agree with its own instinctive convictions.

An audience demands sympathy, which I take to be no more than direction of interest, for it is well-known that a sympathetic character need not be a virtuous one. It has a moral code which, according to the time, may be stricter or more lax than that of the individual. At the present moment, in England at all events, it is shocked by things that would

not shock the individual, though under the reign of Charles II, when probably the general morality was little different from what it is now, it accepted conduct which would have outraged him. It is emotional, but at the same time has more commonsense than the individual. It has its own theories of life which do not always coincide with life as known by the individual. Though swayed by impulse it does not believe in it on the stage. The individual can hardly have failed to notice that the actions of men are much influenced by their passions, but an audience insists that they shall be influenced only by reason. It demands much stronger motives than are demanded in real life. For example, it so often happens that men throw themselves into the water to save a perfect stranger from drowning that the newspapers seldom trouble to announce the fact, but on the stage if you made someone do anything of the kind the spectators would shrug their shoulders and say 'These things don't happen.' You could only make the occurrence probable by giving at least three overwhelming personal reasons for such a piece of foolhardiness. An audience has also racial characteristics. The English are not a sexual nation and you cannot easily persuade them that a man will sacrifice anything important for love. I do not think an English audience, notwithstanding the prestige of Shakespeare, ever really accepts the story of Antony and Cleopatra as credible. It is this difference of attitude towards sexual passion that makes foreign plays so improbable to us.

It is clear that the dramatist's business is with the audience as an organic whole and not with the persons who make it up. As soon as they leave the theatre and go about their separate affairs they cease to be an audience and he has no further concern with them. This reduces sensibly the didactic efficiency of the drama, on account of which writers have from time to time been attracted to the stage, for if the individual is so much inclined to hypnotic suggestion that he cannot shake off the emotions he has felt when his personality was fused in that of the audience, he is not a safe

person to be trusted alone, and should promptly be shut up in an asylum

The acute reader of the foregoing remarks will see at once that they reduce dramatic criticism to a logical absurdity I wish for the sake of those who follow this calling that I could have concealed the fact from him But the deduction is too obvious The critic trains himself not to be influenced by the passions of the people who surround him, but in so doing he does not see the play which they see His rôle is to keep free from the contagion of the audience But the audience is so much part of the play that you cannot judge it unless you are the audience He aims at holding aloof from popular clamour, but it is only by popular clamour, the thrill that passes through the house, the excitement of propinquity, that the play exists Only one form of criticism is logically reasonable If a critic were so sensitive to the emotion about him that he could feel it in all its subtlety and if he had at the same time the power to stand outside himself and note his sensations, his criticism would be, to the playwright at least, exceedingly useful But I suppose that a man with such gifts would in these democratic days rule empires rather than write dramatic criticism

I beg the reader not to think that these remarks were designed to take the bread out of the mouths of that body of honest, industrious, long-suffering and conscientious men who make their living by judging the current drama It was not indeed till I had set down in black and white my reflections on the nature of an audience that it occurred to me that I had incidentally demonstrated the futility of dramatic criticism Nothing was further from my intention We greatly need in England a critic of authoritative position who would be capable of restating the limitations of the various arts, who had the culture and the knowledge of life to point out to those who overstepped the boundaries that they were attempting the impossible, and whose philosophical attainments were sufficient to explain why the direction they were taking must lead to confusion

For want of this the creators of art are at sixes and sevens. They do not know exactly what they want to do nor what they can do. Sculptors seek to imprison the momentary gesture in imperishable bronze, musicians describe events, poets paint landscapes, essayists write poems in prose (and what detestable, pretentious stuff), novelists write treatises of sociology, and dramatists reason.

It can hardly be denied that at the present time the drama of England is poor. The reason given for this is that the cost of production has so increased that managers hesitate to give new authors a hearing. I do not think this is a fact. The bills of the London theatres are no longer filled by well-established authors, as they were when first I began writing plays, but by authors who were till recently unheard of. The experimental theatres have given them an opportunity they never had before and the dearth of plays is such that the managers will seize with alacrity upon anything that shows a likelihood of attracting an audience. The way is open to the dramatist. He has only to take it. I think it is much more probable that the poverty of British drama is due to the fact that the playwrights have been influenced by false theories to adventure in a field which the nature of the drama forbids and for which they are temperamentally unfitted. They have been told that they must raise the theatre from the depths to which it has sunk. They have been implored to produce something that the intelligent man can see without loss of self-respect. They are on the whole a modest, sincere lot of men, anxious to do their best, and they have honestly tried to comply with the demands made on them.

A few pages back I acknowledged, I hope with becoming modesty, that my plays must be classed as commercial drama, but I did not stay to consider exactly what that signifies. It is of course a term of depreciation. It describes a play which is a source of profit to the manager and the author and thus one which the public is willing to go and see for at least a hundred nights. It infers a lack of artistic

merit. It is not immediately obvious why a play that people do not want to see is more artistic than one they do. If commercial success is the test a certain difficulty arises. It appears that Bernard Shaw was a commercial dramatist when he wrote *St Joan* and an artist when he wrote *Back to Methuselah*. What are you going to think of *Man and Superman*? When it was first written it was very distinctly uncommercial: did it cease to be a work of art when it was produced by Robert Lorraine and everyone concerned made a great deal of money out of it? "Commercial" plays often fail too, four out of five is, I believe, the average, and the reasons for their failure are generally plain. I will enumerate them: a theme that does not interest, poor characterisation, faulty construction, verbose and heavy dialogue. Now it is a very strange thing, but if you examine the plays which are deliberately uncommercial and whose failure the judicious grieve at, you will find they suffer from one or all of these defects. In short the "uncommercial" theatre is uncommercial not because of its merits but because of its faults. A "commercial" play is commercial because of its merits.

It is an error to suppose that the writer of this sort of play writes only to make money. A very small experience of the profession of letters teaches you that to write with this end is folly. It is like happiness which is best achieved by not aiming at it. You earn most money when you write merely to please yourself. Of course you need not go out of your way to make things difficult. You are not likely to attain domestic felicity if you give your wife a black eye and knock your children about, nor will you earn substantial royalties if you write a play about the incestuous relations of a family of mental deficients. But now the intelligent reader sits up and takes notice. That is what we want, he cries, that is the theatre of ideas. All right. Let us leave the commercial theatre and talk of the theatre of ideas.

Ideas appeal to reason. But when you appeal to the reason of an audience you are faced with the difficulty that all its

members are not on the same level of culture. A discussion on the shape of the planet cannot be of entrancing interest to those who are already acquainted with the glorious fact that the earth is round. Many writers, when they had produced a play of ideas, have been disappointed to find that a large part of the audience was bored stiff and that the critics only sneered. Stale ideas are no more palatable than stale fish. The fact is that ideas do not grow on every gooseberry bush. I suppose that no one knows exactly why the dramatist can say things in such a way and so present actions that they hold an audience. I can only surmise that it is a rare knack with which he is lucky enough to be born. Experience has shown that it cannot be taught. He must have besides a gift for observation, some literary instinct and a considerable knowledge of the world. It is a good deal to ask that he should be an original thinker as well. His mind moves naturally in the concrete. He grows confused when he has to deal with the abstract, and the nature of his intelligence forces him to see the instance rather than the theory.

But even if a dramatist were by a lucky chance to conceive an idea that was both original and momentous what could he do with it? He could only illustrate it. His play would be like those bad movies in the days of the silent film when the story was told you in captions and the pictures served only to put before your eyes what you already knew. That is to waste the possibilities of the medium. Nor, I suggest, is dialogue the best way of presenting ideas. I do not suppose anyone has used it to better purpose than Plato, but take any one of his dialogues and notice how exasperating it is, once you are interested in the argument, to be held up by the give and take of conversation.

"You will grant, my dear Polemarchus, that a physician is useless to persons in sound health."

"Certainly."

"And a pilot to persons on shore?"

"Yes."

"Is the just man, also, useless to those who are not at war?"

"I do not quite think that "

"Then justice is useful in time of peace too, is it?"

"It is "

"And so is agriculture, is it not?"

"Yes "

"That is to say, as a means of acquiring the fruits of the earth "

"Yes "

"And further, the shoemaker's art is also useful, is it not?"

"Yes "

"As a means of acquiring shoes, I suppose you will say "

"Certainly "

Does one not wish he would cut the cackle and come to the 'osses? For my part I prefer ideas to be presented to me with lucidity and succinctness. I do not want to be persuaded to accept the thinker's thought by his art, I want to be convinced by his logic.

The reader must not do me the injustice of supposing that I believe there is no room for thought in the theatre. The more intelligent a dramatist is the better will be his plays. I suggest merely that ideas, new or old, as such, are no concern of his. He must translate them in terms of emotion. He must feel them before they can affect his audience. And what has feeling to do with ideas? The appeal of ideas is to the reason and reason is occupied with truth. But the drama is occupied only with verisimilitude. And what, if you please, is the dramatist going to do when truth is on one side and dramatic effect on the other? I can tell you. If he is a dramatist he will let truth go to the devil (should he be of a scrupulous nature perhaps consoling himself with some fine phrases about the higher truth of art), but if he is a philosopher he will let his play go hang. And that will be the end of his play.

Nor is the drama even a good vehicle for propaganda. I may think that the administration of the dole is very stupid

and by choosing characters and instances to prove my case I can make out a scandalous state of things. But I have proved nothing. But choosing other characters and other instances I can show exactly the opposite. And such odd things happen in the theatre that a writer can never be sure that the moral he inculcates will emerge from the circumstances he displays. John Galsworthy wrote *Justice* to show the evils of the prison system and because he was a very able dramatist wrote an interesting and moving play, but what he actually showed was the efficiency with which society eliminates the unfit. The didactic writer may load his dice, but he can never be certain that he will throw sixes every time.

Prose drama is one of the lesser arts, like woodcarving or dancing, but so far as it is an art at all its purpose is to afford delight. I do not think it can usefully concern itself with the welfare of humanity or the saving of civilisation. I am afraid certain critics will say that I am cynical and hold the theatre in contempt. I am afraid of this because they have said it before and critics (like the rest of us) often repeat themselves. I do not think this is so. It may be (and this I do not assert but throw out as a suggestion) that I have naturally good taste and that my conception of the art I practised is the correct one. In the eighteenth century, poets were didactic and wrote long poems on agriculture, astronomy, bee-keeping, forestry and suchlike subjects. They were much praised for doing so. Now we are all agreed that they were in error. When we want to know about such things we consult a text-book. We do not want our poets to impart information or to inculcate the principles of morality. It may be that in a little while people will think that the drama will do best to confine itself to what it can best do. This in my opinion is to give pleasure by telling a story, delineating character, and by stirring the emotions or causing laughter.

The Anglo-Saxon race has always looked upon the artist with misgiving. They have never accepted him as a serious person and now that the spread of education has enabled

writers to move out of Grub Street, this want of consideration is irksome to them unless they have a sense of humour or a happy indifference to the opinion of their fellows. Writers consequently are apt to claim moral intentions and pedagogic ends. They seek respectability by adopting a portentous attitude. I think it is a pity. So far as the dramatists are concerned too many, who might write very good, workmanlike plays, thus waste their talents. And the English have a cruel sense of humour. I think they never laugh so much as when they destroy an artist by turning him into a prophet.

I have little to say of the three last plays in this volume. *The Circle* is generally thought the best play I have written. I have always thought that the device suggested by Clive Champion-Cheney to his son to prevent Elizabeth running away not very happy. I should have liked at that point a more substantial and dramatic invention. *The Constant Wife* was a failure in London. It was a great success in America, in the foreign countries where it has been produced and even in the provincial towns in England in which it has been from time to time acted. Where it has been successful it has been much praised by the critics. Not of course because they were influenced by its success, but because a play consists of the words, the production and the audience, and the failure of one of the parties concerned may make the difference between a good play and a bad one.

OUR BETTERS

A COMEDY

in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

LADY GRAYSTON
DUCHESS DE SURENNES
PRINCIPESSA DELLA CERCOLA
ELIZABETH SAUNDERS
ARTHUR FENWICK
THORNTON CLAY
FLEMING HARVEY
ANTHONY PAXTON
LORD BLEANE
POLE
ERNEST

The action of the play takes place at LADY GRAYSTON'S house in Grosvenor Street, Mayfair, and at her husband's place in Suffolk, Abbots Kenton.

OUR BETTERS

THE FIRST ACT

SCENE *The drawing-room at LADY GRAYSTON'S house in Grosvenor Street, Mayfair It is a sumptuous double room, of the period of George II, decorated in green and gold, with a coromandel screen and lacquer cabinets, but the coverings of the chairs, the sofas and cushions, show the influence of Bakst and the Russian Ballet, they offer an agreeable mixture of rich plum, emerald green, canary and ultra-marine On the floor is a Chinese carpet, and here and there are pieces of Ming pottery It is about half-past four, early in the season, and a fine day When the curtain rises, from the street below is heard the melancholy chant of the lavender man*

Won't you buy my sweet lavender?
Sixteen blue branches for a penny
If you buy it once,
You'll buy it twice,
For it makes your clothes
Smell very nice—
Sweet-scented lavender

BESSIE SAUNDERS *comes in She is a very pretty American girl, of twenty-two, with fair hair and blue eyes She is dressed in the latest mode She wears a hat and gloves, and carries a bag She has just come in from the street She has in her hand a telephone message, and going over to the telephone she takes up the receiver*

BESSIE Gerrard 4321 Is that the Berkeley? Put me

through to Mr Harvey, please Fleming Harvey, that's right [*She listens and smiles*] Yes Who d'you think it is? [*She laughs*] I've just got your telephone message Where have you sprung from? That's fine How long are you staying in London? I see I want to see you at once Nonsense This very minute Now just jump into a taxi and come right away Pearl will be in presently Ring off, Fleming No, I will not ring off first [*A pause*] Are you there? How tiresome you are You might be half-way here by now Well, hustle

[She puts down the receiver and begins to take off her gloves POLE, the butler, comes in with a bunch of roses]

POLE These flowers have just come for you, miss

BESSIE Oh! Thank you Aren't they lovely? You must give me something to put them in, Pole

POLE I'll bring a vase, miss

[He goes out She buries her face in the flowers and inhales their fragrance The BUTLER enters with a bowl filled with water]

BESSIE Thank you You're sure they *are* for me? There's no label

POLE Yes, miss The person who brought them said they was for you, miss I asked if there wasn't a card, and he said no, miss

BESSIE [*With a faint smile*] I think I know who they're from [*She begins to arrange the flowers*] Her ladyship hasn't come in yet, has she?

POLE Not yet, miss

BESSIE D'you know if anyone is coming in to tea?

POLE Her ladyship didn't say, miss

BESSIE You'd better prepare for fifteen, then.

POLE Very good, miss

BESSIE I was being funny, Pole

POLE Yes, miss? Shall I take the paper away, miss?

BESSIE [*With a slight sigh of resignation*] Yes, do, will you?
[*The telephone bell rings*] Oh, I forgot, I switched the telephone on here See who it is

[*POLE takes up the receiver and listens, then puts his hand over his mouth*]

POLE Will you speak to Lord Bleane, miss?

BESSIE Say I'm not at home

POLE Miss Saunders hasn't come in yet I beg pardon, my lord I didn't recognise your lordship's voice [*A pause*] Well, my lord, I did hear them say there was a private view they thought of going to at the Grosvenor You might find Miss Saunders there

BESSIE You needn't elaborate, Pole

POLE I was only making it more convincing, miss [*Listening*] I think so, my lord Of course, I couldn't say for certain, my lord, they might have gone out to Ranelagh

BESSIE Really, Pole?

POLE Very good, my lord [*He puts down the receiver*] His lordship asked if you was expected in to tea, miss

POLE Is there anything else, miss?

BESSIE No, Pole, thank you

[*He goes out She finishes arranging the flowers The door is flung open and LADY GRAYSTON comes in, followed by FLEMING HARVEY PEARL—LADY GRAYSTON—is a handsome, dashing creature, a woman of thirty-four, with red hair, and a face outrageously painted She is dressed in a Paris frock, but of greater daring both in colour and cut than a Frenchwoman would wear FLEMING is a nice-looking young American in clothes that were obviously made in New York.*]

PEARL My dear Bessie, I've found an entirely strange young man on the doorstep who says he is a cousin

BESSIE [*Giving him her hands enthusiastically*] Fleming

FLEMING I introduced myself to Lady Grayston She drove up just as they were opening the door Please reassure your sister, Bessie She looks upon me with suspicion

BESSIE You must remember Fleming Harvey, Pearl

PEARL I've never set eyes on him in my life But he looks quite nice

BESSIE He is

PEARL He's apparently come to see you

FLEMING I rang up five minutes ago and Bessie ordered me to come round right away

PEARL Well, make him stop to tea I've got to telephone I've suddenly remembered that I've asked twelve people to dinner

BESSIE Does George know?

PEARL Who is George?

BESSIE Don't be absurd, Pearl George—your husband

PEARL Oh! I couldn't make out who you meant No, he doesn't know But what's much more important, the cook doesn't know either I'd forgotten George was in London
[She goes out]

BESSIE George generally dines out when Pearl is giving a party, because he doesn't like people he doesn't know, and he seldom dines at home when we're alone, because it bores him

FLEMING It doesn't sound as if Sir George enjoyed many of the benefits of home life

BESSIE Now let's sit down and make ourselves comfortable You are going to stay to tea, aren't you?

FLEMING It's not a beverage that I'm in the habit of imbibing

BESSIE When you've been in England a month you won't be able to do without it When did you land?

FLEMING This morning You see, I've lost no time in coming to see you

BESSIE I should think not It *is* good to see someone straight from home

FLEMING Have you been having a good time, Bessie?

BESSIE Wonderful! Since the beginning of the season, except when Pearl has had people here, I've been out to lunch and dinner every day, and I've been to a ball every night, generally two and sometimes three

FLEMING Geel

BESSIE If I stopped now I'd drop down dead

FLEMING D'you like England?

BESSIE I adore it I think it's too bad of dad never to have let me come over to London before Rome and Paris are nothing We're just trippers there, but here we're at home

FLEMING Don't get too much at home, Bessie

BESSIE Oh, Fleming, I never thanked you for sending me the roses It was perfectly sweet of you

FLEMING [*With a smile*] I didn't send you any roses

BESSIE Didn't you? Well, why didn't you?

FLEMING I hadn't time But I will

BESSIE It's too late now I naturally thought they were from you, because Englishmen don't send flowers in the same way as American boys do

FLEMING Is that so?

[*There is a slight pause Bessie gives him a quick look*]

BESSIE Fleming, I want to thank you for that charming letter you wrote me

FLEMING There's no occasion to do that, Bessie.

BESSIE I was afraid you might feel badly about it But we'll always be the greatest friends, won't we?

FLEMING Always

BESSIE After all, you were eighteen when you asked me to marry you, and I was sixteen It wasn't a very serious engagement I don't know why we didn't break it off before

FLEMING I suppose it never occurred to us

BESSIE I'd almost forgotten it, but when I came over here I thought I'd better make everything quite clear

FLEMING [*With a smile*] Bessie, I believe you're in love

BESSIE No, I'm not I tell you I'm having a wonderful time

FLEMING Well, who sent you the roses?

BESSIE I don't know Lord Bleane

FLEMING You're not going to marry a lord, Bessie?

BESSIE Have you any objection?

FLEMING Well, on first principles, I think American girls had better marry American men, but then I happen to be an American man

[BESSIE looks at him for a moment]

BESSIE Pearl gave a dinner party last night I was taken in by a cabinet minister, and on the other side of me I had an ambassador Just opposite was a man who'd been Viceroy in India Madame Angelotti dined with us, and she sang afterwards, and a lot of people came on from an official dinner in their stars and ribands Pearl looked superb She's a wonderful hostess, you know Several people told me they would rather come here than to any house in London Before Pearl married George Grayston she was engaged to a boy who was in business in Portland, Oregon

FLEMING [*Smiling*] I see you're quite determined to marry a lord

BESSIE No, I'm not I'm keeping an open mind on the subject

FLEMING What d'you mean by that?

BESSIE Well, Fleming, it hasn't escaped my notice that a certain noble lord is not unwilling to lay his beautiful coronet at my feet

FLEMING Don't talk like a novelette, Bessie

BESSIE But it feels just like a novelette The poor dear is trying to propose to me every time he sees me, and I'm doing all I can to prevent him

FLEMING Why?

BESSIE I don't want to refuse him, and then wish I hadn't

FLEMING You could easily make him ask you again
Women find that so simple

BESSIE Ah, but supposing he went right away to shoot big game in Africa It's what they do, you know, in novelettes

FLEMING I'm reassured about one thing You're not in the least in love with him

BESSIE I told you I wasn't You don't mind my saying all this to you, Fleming?

FLEMING Gracious, no, why should I?

BESSIE You're sure you don't feel sore at my throwing you over?

FLEMING [*Cheerfully*] Not a bit

BESSIE I am glad, because then I can tell you all about the noble lord

FLEMING Has it occurred to you that he wants to marry you for your money?

BESSIE You can put it more prettily You can say that he wants to marry me with my money

FLEMING And is that a prospect that allures you?

BESSIE Poor dear, what else can he do? He's got a large place to keep up, and he simply hasn't a cent

FLEMING Really, Bessie, you amaze me

BESSIE I shan't when you've been here a month

[PEARL comes in]

PEARL Now, Bessie, tell me all about this strange young man

BESSIE He's quite capable of telling you about himself

PEARL [To FLEMING] How long are you staying?

FLEMING A couple of months I want to see something of English life

PEARL I see D'you want to improve your mind or d'you want to go into society?

FLEMING I suppose I couldn't combine the two.

PEARL Are you rich?

FLEMING Not at all

PEARL It doesn't matter, you're good-looking If one wants to be a success in London one must either have looks, wit, or a bank-balance You know Arthur Fenwick, don't you?

FLEMING Only by reputation

PEARL How superciliously you say that!

FLEMING He provides bad food to the working classes of the United States at an exorbitant price I have no doubt he makes a lot of money

BESSIE He's a great friend of Pearl's

PEARL When he first came over because they turned up their noses at him in New York, I said to him My dear Mr Fenwick, you're not good-looking, you're not amusing, you're not well-bred, you're *only* rich If you want to get into society you must spend money

FLEMING It was evidently in the nature of a straight talk

BESSIE We must do what we can for Fleming, Pearl

PEARL [*With a chuckle*] We'll introduce him to Minnie Surennes

FLEMING Who in the world is she?

PEARL The Duchesse de Surennes Don't you remember? She was a Miss Hodgson Chicago people Of course, they're nobody in America, but that doesn't matter over here She adores good-looking boys, and I daresay she's getting rather tired of Tony [*To BESSIE*] By the way, they're coming in this afternoon

BESSIE I don't like Tony

PEARL Why not? I think he's charming He's the most unprincipled ruffian I ever met

FLEMING Is Tony the duke?

PEARL What duke? Her husband? Oh no, she divorced him years ago

BESSIE I think Fleming would like the Princess much better

PEARL Oh, well, he'll meet her here to-day, too.

BESSIE She was a Miss van Hoog, Fleming.

FLEMING Is she divorced too?

PEARL Oh no, her husband's an Italian. It's very difficult to get a divorce in Italy She's only separated She's quite nice She's one of my greatest friends She bores me a little

[*POLE comes in to announce THORNTON CLAY and then goes out THORNTON CLAY is a stout American with a bald head and an effusive manner He is somewhat overdressed He speaks with a marked American accent*]

POLE Mr Thornton Clay

CLAY How d'you do?

PEARL You're the very person we want, Thornton An entirely strange young man has suddenly appeared on my doorstep, and says he's my cousin

CLAY My dear Pearl, that is a calamity which we Americans must always be prepared for

BESSIE I won't have you say such things, Mr Clay Fleming is not only our cousin, but he's my very oldest friend Aren't you, Fleming?

PEARL Bessie has a charming nature She really thinks that friendship puts one under an obligation

FLEMING Since you're talking of me, won't you introduce me to Mr Clay?

PEARL How American you are!

FLEMING [*Smiling*] It's not unnatural, is it?

PEARL Over here we haven't the passion that you have in America for introducing people My dear Thornton, allow me to present to you my long-lost cousin, Mr Fleming Harvey

CLAY It's so long since I was in America that I almost forget, but I believe the proper answer to that is Mr Fleming Harvey, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance

FLEMING Aren't you an American, Mr Clay?

CLAY I won't deny that I was born in Virginia

FLEMING I beg your pardon, I thought from the way you spoke

CLAY [*Interrupting*] But, of course, my home is London

PEARL Nonsense, Thornton, your home is wherever there's a first-class hotel

CLAY I went to America seven years ago My father died and I had to go and settle up his affairs Everyone took me for an Englishman

FLEMING That must have gratified you very much, Mr Clay

CLAY Of course, I haven't a trace of an American accent I suppose that was the reason And then my clothes

[*He looks down at them with satisfaction.*]

PEARL Fleming wants to see life in London, Thornton He can't do better than put himself under your wing

CLAY I know everyone who's worth knowing I can't deny that

PEARL Thornton calls more countesses by their Christian names than any man in town

CLAY I'll get him cards for some good balls, and I'll see that he's asked to one or two of the right parties

PEARL He's good-looking, and I'm sure he dances well He'll be a credit to you, Thornton

CLAY [*To FLEMING*] But, of course, there's really nothing I *can* do for you At Lady Grayston's you are in the very hub of society I don't mean the stuffy, old-fashioned society, that goes about in barouches and bores itself stiff, but the society that counts, the society that figures in the newspapers Pearl is the most wonderful hostess in London

PEARL What *do* you want, Thornton?

CLAY In this house, sooner or later, you'll meet every remarkable man in England except one That is George Grayston. And he's only remarkable because he's her husband

PEARL [*With a chuckle*] I might have known you were only saying a pleasant thing in order to make the next one more disagreeable

CLAY Of course, I can't make out why you never ask George to your parties Personally I like him

PEARL That's all the nicer of you, Thornton, since he always speaks of you as that damned snob

CLAY [*With a shrug of the shoulders*] Poor George, he has such a limited vocabulary I met Flora della Cercola at luncheon to-day She told me she was coming to tea with you.

PEARL She's getting up a concert in aid of something or other, and she wants me to help her

CLAY Poor Flora, with her good works! She takes philanthropy as a drug to allay the pangs of unrequited love

PEARL I always tell her she'd do much better to take a lover

CLAY You'll shock Mr Harvey

PEARL It won't hurt him It'll do him good

CLAY Did you ever know her husband?

PEARL Oh yes, I met him Just the ordinary little Dago I cannot imagine why she should ever have been in love with him She's an extraordinary creature D'you know, I'm convinced that she's never had an affair

CLAY Some of these American women are strangely sexless

FLEMING I have an idea that some of them are even virtuous

PEARL [*With a smile*] It takes all sorts to make a world

[POLE enters to announce the DUCHESS DE SURENNES, and then goes out]

POLE The Duchesse de Surennes

[*The DUCHESS is a large, dark woman of forty-five with scarlet lips and painted cheeks, a woman of opulent form, bold, self-assured and outrageously sensual She suggests a drawing of a Roman Emperor by Aubrey Beardsley She is gowned with a certain dashing magnificence, and wears a long string of large pearls round her neck During the conversation POLE and two footmen bring in tea, and place it in the back drawing-room.*]

PEARL My dear, how nice of you to come.

DUCHESS Isn't Tony here?

PEARL No

DUCHESS He said he was coming straight here

PEARL I daresay he's been delayed

DUCHESS I can't understand it He telephoned a quarter of an hour ago that he was starting at once

PEARL [*Reassuringly*] He'll be here presently

DUCHESS [*With an effort over herself*] How pretty you're looking, Bessie No wonder all the men I meet rave about you

BESSIE Englishmen are so shy Why don't they rave *to me*?

DUCHESS They'll never let you go back to America

PEARL Of course, she's never going back I'm determined that she shall marry an Englishman

CLAY She'll make a charming addition to our American peeresses

PEARL And there'll be another that you can call by her Christian name, Thornton

BESSIE I wish you wouldn't talk as if I hadn't a word to say in the matter

CLAY Of course, you've got a word to say, Bessie—a very important one

BESSIE Yes, I suppose?

CLAY Exactly

PEARL Pour out the tea, darling, will you?

BESSIE Surely [*To CLAY*] I know you don't share Fleming's contempt for tea, Mr Clay

CLAY I couldn't live a day without it. Why, I never travel without a tea basket

FLEMING [*Ironically*] Is that so?

CLAY You Americans who live in America . . .

FLEMING [*Under his breath*] So queer of us

CLAY Despise the delectable habit of drinking tea because you are still partly barbarous The hour that we spend

over it is the most delightful of the day We do not make a business of eating as at luncheon or dinner We are at ease with ourselves We toy with pretty cakes as an excuse for conversation We discuss the abstract, our souls, our morals, we play delicately with the concrete, our neighbour's new bonnet or her latest lover We drink tea because we are a highly civilised nation

FLEMING I must be very stupid, but I don't follow

CLAY My dear fellow, the degree of a nation's civilisation is marked by its disregard for the necessities of existence You have gone so far as to waste money, but we have gone farther, we waste what is infinitely more precious, more transitory, more irreparable—we waste time

DUCHESS My dear Thornton, you fill me with despair Compton Edwardes has cut me off my tea I thought he was only depriving me of a luxury, now I see he's depriving me also of a religious rite

FLEMING Who in heaven's name is Compton Edwardes, that he should have such influence?

PEARL My dear Fleming, he's the most powerful man in London He's the great reducer

FLEMING Gracious! What does he reduce?

PEARL Fat

DUCHESS He's a perfect marvel, that man Do you know, the Duchess of Arlington told me he'd taken nine pounds off her

PEARL My dear, that's nothing Why, Clara Hollington gave me her word of honour she'd lost over a stone

BESSIE [*From the tea-table*] Anyone who wants tea must come and fetch it

[The men saunter over to the next room, while PEARL and the DUCHESS go on with their conversation]

DUCHESS Who is that nice-looking young man, Pearl?

PEARL Oh, he's a young American He pretends to be a cousin of mine He's come to see Bessie

DUCHESSE Does he want to marry her?

PEARL Good heavens, I hope not He's only an old friend
You know the funny ways they have in America

DUCHESSE I suppose nothing is really settled about Harry Bleane?

PEARL No But I shouldn't be surprised if you saw an announcement in the Morning Post one day

DUCHESSE Has she enough money for him?

PEARL She has a million

DUCHESSE Not pounds?

PEARL Oh no, dollars

DUCHESSE That's only eight thousand a year I shouldn't have thought he'd be satisfied with that

PEARL People can't expect so much nowadays There won't be any more enormous heiresses as there were in your time Besides, Harry Bleane isn't such a catch as all that Of course, it's better to be an English baron than an Italian count, but that's about all you can say for it.

DUCHESSE Of course she'll accept him?

PEARL Oh yes, she's crazy to live in England And as I tell her, it's quite pleasant to be a peeress even now.

DUCHESSE What on earth can have happened to Tony?

PEARL My dear, he's not likely to have been run over by a motor-bus

DUCHESSE I'm not afraid of motor-buses running over him, I'm afraid of him running after Gaiety girls

PEARL [*Drily*] I should have thought you kept a very sharp eye on him

DUCHESSE You see, he hasn't got anything to do from morning till night.

PEARL Why doesn't he get a job?

DUCHESS I've been trying to get him something, but it's so difficult You've got such a lot of influence, Pearl Can't you do something? I should be so grateful

PEARL What can he do?

DUCHESS Anything And as you know he's very good-looking

PEARL Does he know French and German?

DUCHESS No, he has no gift for languages

PEARL Can he type and write shorthand?

DUCHESS Oh, no Poor dear, you can hardly expect that

PEARL Can he do accounts?

DUCHESS No, he has no head for figures

PEARL [*Reflectively*] Well, the only thing I can see that he'd do for is a government office

DUCHESS Oh, my dear, if you only could manage that You can't think what a comfort it would be for me to know that he couldn't get into mischief at least from ten to four every day

[*POLE announces* TONY PAXTON *TONY is a handsome youth of twenty-five, in beautiful clothes, with engaging manners and a charming smile*]

POLE Mr Paxton

PEARL Well, Tony, how is life?

TONY Rotten I haven't backed a winner or won a rubber this week

PEARL Ah well, that's the advantage of not having money, you can afford to lose it

DUCHESS [*Bursting in*] Where have you been, Tony?

TONY I? Nowhere

DUCHESS You said you were coming straight here It doesn't take twenty-five minutes to get here from Dover Street.

TONY I thought there wasn't any hurry I was just hanging about the club

DUCHESS I rang up the club again, and they said you'd gone

TONY [*After a very slight pause*] I was downstairs having a shave, and I suppose they never thought of looking for me in the barber's shop

DUCHESS What on earth did you want to be shaved for at half-past four in the afternoon?

TONY I thought you'd like me to look nice and clean

PEARL Go and get Bessie to give you some tea, Tony, I'm sure you want it after the strenuous day you've had

[He nods and walks into the inner room]

PEARL Minnie, how can you be so silly? You can't expect to keep a man if you treat him like that

DUCHESS I know he's lying to me, there's not a word of truth in anything he says but he's so slim I can never catch him out Oh, I'm so jealous

PEARL Are you really in love with him?

DUCHESS He's everything in the world to me

PEARL You shouldn't let yourself be carried away like this

DUCHESS I'm not cold-blooded like you

PEARL You seem to have a passion for rotters, and they always treat you badly

DUCHESS Oh, I don't care about the others Tony is the only one I've ever really loved

PEARL Nonsense! You were just as much in love with Jack Harris You did everything in the world for him You taught him to wear his clothes You got him into society And the moment he could do without you he chucked you Tony will do just the same.

DUCHESS I'm not going to be such a fool this time I'm going to take care he can't do without me

PEARL I can't imagine what you see in him You must know that

DUCHESS [Interrupting] There's very little I don't know
He's a liar, a gambler, an idler, a spendthrift, but in his way he is fond of me [Appealingly] You can see he's fond of me, can't you?

PEARL He's so much younger than you, Minnie

DUCHESS I can't help it I love him

PEARL Oh, well, I suppose it's no good talking As long as he makes you happy

DUCHESS He doesn't He makes me miserable But I love him
He wants me to marry him, Pearl

PEARL You're not going to?

DUCHESS No, I won't be such a fool as that If I married him I'd have no hold over him at all

[Enter POLE to announce the PRINCESS DELLA CERCOLA
She is a tall, thin woman of thirty-five, with a pale, baggard face and great dark eyes She is a gentle, kind creature, but there is something pathetic, almost tragic, in her appearance She is dressed, though very well, and obviously by a Paris dressmaker, more quietly than the DUCHESS or PEARL She has not only wealth, but distinction

POLE Princess della Cercola

[Exit PEARL gets up to receive her They kiss

PEARL Darling!

PRINCESS D'you hate me for coming to bother you? I ran up because I know how difficult you are to catch
[Kissing the DUCHESS] How are you, Minnie?

DUCHESS Don't ask me for a subscription, Flora I'm so poor

PRINCESS [Smiling] Wait till I tell you what it's for, and then you'll remember that you had a father called Spencer Hodgson

DUCHESSE [*With a little groan*] As if I wanted to be reminded of it!

PEARL You're so absurd, Minnie You should make a joke of the pork I always tell people about father's hardware store, and when I haven't got a funny story to tell about it, I invent one

PRINCESS You've made your father quite a character in London

PEARL That's why I never let him come over He couldn't possibly live up to his reputation

[FLEMING HARVEY *comes forward from the inner room*]

FLEMING I'm going to say good-bye to you

PEARL You mustn't go before I've introduced you to Flora
Flora, this is Mr Fleming Harvey He's just come from America He probably carries a six-shooter in his hip-pocket

FLEMING I'm told I mayn't say I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Princess

PRINCESS When did you land?

FLEMING This morning

PRINCESS I envy you

FLEMING Because I landed this morning?

PRINCESS No, because a week ago you were in America

DUCHESSE Floral

FLEMING I was beginning to think it was something to be rather ashamed of

PRINCESS Oh, you mustn't pay any attention to Pearl and the Duchesse They're so much more English than the English

PEARL I notice you show your devotion to the country of your birth by staying away from it, Flora

PRINCESS Last time I was in America it made me so unhappy that I vowed I'd never go there again

DUCHESS I was there ten years ago, when I was divorcing Gaston. I hadn't been in America since my marriage, and I'd forgotten what it was like. Oh, it was so crude. Oh, it was so provincial. You don't mind my saying so, Mr Harvey?

FLEMING Not at all. You're just as American as I am, and there's no reason why among ourselves we shouldn't abuse the mother that bore us.

DUCHESS Oh, but I don't look upon myself as American. I'm French. After all, I haven't a trace of an American accent. To show you how it got on my nerves, I almost didn't divorce Gaston because I thought I couldn't bring myself to stay in America long enough.

PRINCESS It's not because it was crude and provincial that I was unhappy in America. I was unhappy because after all it was home, the only real home I've ever had, and I was a stranger.

PEARL My dear Flora, you're being very sentimental.

PRINCESS [*Smiling*] I'm sorry, I apologise. You're a New Yorker, Mr Harvey?

FLEMING I'm proud of it, madam.

PRINCESS New York's wonderful, isn't it? It has something that no other city in the world has got. I like to think of Fifth Avenue on a spring day. The pretty girls in their smart frocks and neat shoes, who trip along so gaily, and all the good-looking boys.

DUCHESS I grant you that, some of the boys are too lovely for words.

PRINCESS Everyone is so strong and confident. There's such an exaltation in the air. You feel in the passers-by a serene and unshakable belief in the future. Oh, it's very good to be alive in Fifth Avenue on a sunny day in April.

FLEMING It's good for an American to hear another American say such pleasant things about his country.

PRINCESS You must come and see me, and you shall tell me all the news of home

PEARL How high the newest building is, and how much money the latest millionaire has got

FLEMING Good-bye

PEARL Have you made friends with Thornton Clay?

FLEMING I hope so

PEARL You must get him to give you the address of his tailor

FLEMING Aren't you pleased with my clothes?

PEARL They're very American, you know,

FLEMING So am I

[THORNTON CLAY comes forward *The DUCHESSE strolls over to the inner room and is seen talking with BESSIE and TONY PAXTON*

PEARL Thornton, I was just telling Mr Harvey that you'd take him to your tailor

CLAY I was going to suggest it

FLEMING My clothes are not at all a success

PEARL Who d'you go to? Stultz?

CLAY Of course He's the only tailor in London [To FLEMING] Of course he's a German, but art has no nationality

FLEMING I'm pleased at all events to think that it's a German tailor who's going to make me look like an Englishman

[*He goes out* THORNTON *makes his farewells*

CLAY Good-bye, Pearl

PEARL Are you going? Don't forget you're coming down to Kenton on Saturday

CLAY I won't, indeed I adore your week-end parties, Pearl I'm so exhausted by Monday morning that I'm fit for nothing for the rest of the week Good-bye

[He shakes hands and goes out As he is going, POLE opens the door to announce LORD BLEANE He is a young man, very English in appearance, pleasant, clean and well-groomed]

POLE Lord Bleane

[Exit]

PEARL Dear Harry, how nice of you to come

BLEANE I'm in absolute despair

PEARL Good heavens, why?

BLEANE They're sending a mission to Rumania to hand the Garter to some bigwig and I've got to go with it

PEARL Oh, but that'll be very interesting

BLEANE Yes, but we start to-morrow, and I shan't be able to come down to Kenton on Saturday.

PEARL When do you come back?

BLEANE In four weeks

PEARL Then come down to Kenton the Saturday after that

BLEANE May I?

PEARL You must go and break the news to Bessie She was so looking forward to your visit

BLEANE D'you think she'll give me some tea?

PEARL I have no doubt, if you ask her nicely.

[He goes over to the inner room]

PRINCESS Now I've got you to myself for two minutes You will help me with my concert, won't you?

PEARL Of course What do you want me to do? I'll make Arthur Fenwick take any number of tickets. You know how charitable he is

PRINCESS It's for a very good cause

PEARL I'm sure it is But don't harrow me with revolting stories of starving children I'm not interested in the poor

PRINCESS *[Smiling]* How can you say that?

PEARL Are you? I often wonder if your philanthropy isn't an elaborate pose You don't mind my saying that, do you?

PRINCESS [*Good-humouredly*] Not at all You have no heart, and you can't imagine that anyone else should have

PEARL I have plenty of heart, but it beats for people of my own class

PRINCESS I've only found one thing really worth doing with all this money I have, and that is to help a little those who need help

PEARL [*With a shrug*] So long as it makes you happy

PRINCESS It doesn't, but it prevents me from being utterly miserable

PEARL You make me so impatient, Flora You've got more money than you know what to do with You're a princess You've practically got rid of your husband I cannot imagine what more you want I wish I could get rid of mine

PRINCESS [*Smiling*] I don't know what you've got to complain of in George

PEARL That's just it I shouldn't mind if he beat me or made love to chorus girls I could divorce him then Oh, my dear, thank your stars that you had a husband who was grossly unfaithful to you Mine wants me to live nine months of the year in the country and have a baby every five minutes I didn't marry an Englishman for that

PRINCESS Why *did* you marry him?

PEARL I made a mistake I'd lived all my life in New York I was very ignorant I thought if you were a baronet you must be in society

PRINCESS I often wonder if you're happy, Pearl

PEARL Do you? Of course I'm happy

PRINCESS An ambassador told me the other day that you were the most powerful woman in London It's very

wonderful how you've made your way You had nothing very much to help you

PEARL Shall I tell you how it was done? By force of character, wit, unscrupulousness and push

PRINCESS [*Smiling*] You're very frank.

PEARL That has always been my pose

PRINCESS I sometimes think there's positive genius in the way you've ignored the snubs of the great

PEARL [*With a chuckle*] You're being very unpleasant, Flora

PRINCESS And there's something very like heroism in the callousness with which you've dropped people when they've served your turn

PEARL You're driving me to the conclusion that you don't altogether approve of me

PRINCESS On the other hand I can't help admiring you You've brought all the determination, insight, vigour, strength, which have made our countrymen turn America into what it is, to get what you wanted In a way your life has been a work of art And what makes it more complete is that what you've aimed at is trivial, transitory and worthless

PEARL My dear Flora, people don't hunt in order to catch a fox

PRINCESS Sometimes, doesn't it make you rather nervous, when you're sitting on the top of your ladder, in case anyone should give it a kick as he passes?

PEARL It'll want more than a kick to topple my ladder over D'you remember when that silly woman made such a fuss because her husband was in love with me? It wasn't till I only just escaped the divorce court that the duchesses really took me up.

[*The DUCHESS comes forward with TONY PAXTON.*]

DUCHESS We really must be going, Pearl I expect my masseur at six Compton Edwardes told me about him He's wonderful, but he's so run after, if you keep him waiting a moment he goes away

PEARL My dear, do be careful Fanny Hallam got herself down to a mere nothing, but it made her look a hundred

DUCHESS Oh, I know, but Compton Edwardes has recommended to me a wonderful woman who comes every morning to do my face

PEARL You are coming to my ball, aren't you?

DUCHESS Of course we're coming Yours are almost the only parties in London where one amuses oneself as much as at a night club

PEARL I'm having Ernest to come in and dance

DUCHESS I thought of having him one evening How much does he charge for coming in socially?

PEARL Twenty guineas

DUCHESS Good heavens, I could never afford that

PEARL What nonsense! You're far richer than I am

DUCHESS I'm not so clever, darling I can't think how you do so much on your income

PEARL [*Amused*] I'm a very good manager

DUCHESS One would never think it Good-bye, dear Are you coming, Tony?

TONY Yes

[*She goes out*]

TONY [*Shaking hands with PEARL*] I've not had a word with you to-day

PEARL [*Chaffing him*] What are we to do about it?

PRINCESS I *must* get Minnie to go to my concert Minnie
[*She goes out TONY is left face to face with PEARL*]

TONY You're looking perfectly divine to-day I don't know what there is about you.

PEARL [*Amused, but not disconcerted*] It is nice of you to say
so

TONY I simply haven't been able to take my eyes off you

PEARL Are you making love to me?

TONY That's nothing new, is it?

PEARL You'll get into trouble

TONY Don't be disagreeable, Pearl

PEARL I don't remember that I ever told you you might call
me Pearl

TONY It's how I think of you You can't prevent me from
doing that

PEARL Well, I think it's very familiar

TONY I don't know what you've done to me I think of
you all day long

PEARL I don't believe it for a minute You're an un-
principled ruffian, Tony

TONY Do you mind?

PEARL [*With a chuckle*] Shameless creature I wonder what
it is that Minnie sees in you

TONY I have all sorts of merits

PEARL I'm glad you think so I can only discover one

TONY What is that?

PEARL You're somebody else's property

TONY Oh!

PEARL [*Holding out her hand*] Good-bye

[*He kisses her wrist His lips linger She looks at him
from under her eyelashes*]

PEARL It doesn't make you irresistible, you know

TONY There's always the future

PEARL The future's everybody's property.

TONY [*In an undertone.*] Pearl

PEARL Be quick and go Minnie will be wondering why you don't come

[*He goes out PEARL turns away with a smile BESSIE and LORD BLEANE advance into the room*]

PEARL Has Harry broken the news to you that he can't come down to us on Saturday?

[*The PRINCESS comes in*]

PRINCESS I've got my subscription

PEARL I kept Tony up here as long as I could so as to give you a chance

PRINCESS [*With a laugh*] That was really tactful

PEARL Poor Minnie, she's as mean as cat's meat [*With a glance at BESSIE and LORD BLEANE*] If you'd like to come down to the morning-room we can go through my visitors' book and see who'll be useful to you

PRINCESS Oh, that would be kind of you

PEARL [*To BLEANE*] Don't go till I come back, will you? I haven't had a word with you yet

BLEANE All right

[*PEARL and the PRINCESS go out*]

BESSIE I wonder if you sent me these flowers, Lord Bleane?

BLEANE I did I thought you wouldn't mind

BESSIE It was very kind of you

[*She takes two of the roses and puts them in her dress*]

BLEANE *as overcome with shyness He does not know how to begin*

BLEANE D'you mind if I light a cigarette?

BESSIE Not at all

BLEANE [*As he lights it*] D'you know, this is the first time I've ever been alone with you It was very tactful of Lady Grayston to leave us

BESSIE I'm not sure if it wasn't a trifle too tactful.

BLEANE I was hoping most awfully to have the chance of getting a talk with you

*[The song of the lavender is heard again in the street
BESSIE welcomes the diversion]*

BESSIE Oh, listen, there's the lavender man come back again
[She goes to the window and listens] Throw him down a shilling, will you?

BLEANE All right *[He takes a coin from his pocket and throws it into the street]*

BESSIE I seem to feel all the charm of England in that funny little tune. It suggests cottage gardens, and hedges, and winding roads

BLEANE My mother grows lavender at home. When we were kids we were made to pick it, and my mother used to put it in little muslin bags and tie them up with pink ribbon. And she used to put them under the pillows of one's bed and in all the drawers. Shall I ask her to send you some?

BESSIE Oh, that would be such a bother for her

BLEANE It wouldn't. She'd like to. And you know, it's not like the lavender you buy. It knocks spots off anything you can get in shops

BESSIE You must hate leaving London at this time of year

BLEANE Oh, I'm not very keen on London. *[Making a dash for it]* I hate leaving you

BESSIE *[With comic desperation]* Let's not talk about me, Lord Bleane

BLEANE But that's the only topic that occurs to me.

BESSIE There's always the weather in England.

BLEANE You see, I'm off to-morrow

BESSIE. I never saw anyone so obstinate

BLEANE I shan't see you again for nearly a month. We haven't known one another very long, and if I hadn't

been going away I expect I'd have thought it better to wait a bit

BESSIE [*Clasping her hands*] Lord Bleane, don't propose to me

BLEANE Why not?

BESSIE Because I shall refuse you

BLEANE Oh!

BESSIE Tell me about the part of the country you live in I don't know Kent at all Is it pretty?

BLEANE I don't know It's home

BESSIE I love those old Elizabethan houses that you have in England with all their chimneys

BLEANE Oh, ours isn't a show place, you know It's just a rather ugly yellow brick house that looks like a box, and it's got a great big stucco portico in front of it I think the garden's rather jolly

BESSIE Pearl hates Abbots Kenton She'd sell it if George would She's only really happy in London

BLEANE I don't know that I was so particularly struck on Bleane till I was over in France When I was in hospital at Boulogne there didn't seem much to do but to think about things It didn't seem as if I *could* get well I knew I should if they'd only let me come home, but they wouldn't, they said I couldn't be moved It's rather bleak in our part of the country We've got an east wind that people find a bit trying, but if you've been used to it all your life it bucks you up wonderful In summer it can be awfully hot down there, but there's always something fresh and salt in the air You see, we're so near the marshes It was only just across the water, and it seemed such an awful long way off I ain't boring you, am I?

BESSIE No I want you to tell me

BLEANE It's a funny sort of country There are a lot of green fields and elm trees, and the roads wind about—it's rotten for motoring, and then you have the marshes, with dykes in them—we used to jump them when we were boys, and fall in mostly, and then there's the sea It doesn't sound much, but I felt it was the most ripping thing I knew And then there are hop-fields—I forgot them—and the oast-houses They're rather picturesque, I suppose I expect it's like the lavender to you To me it's just England

[BESSIE gets up and walks towards the window In the distance is heard the melancholy cry of the lavender man

BLEANE What are you thinking about?

BESSIE It must be very wonderful to feel like that about one's home I've never known anything but a red stone house in Nineteenth Street As soon as dad can get a decent offer for it we're going to move further up town Mother has a fancy for Seventy-Second Street, I don't know why

BLEANE Of course, I know it couldn't mean the same to a girl that it means to me I shouldn't expect anyone to live there always I can be quite happy in London

BESSIE [With a smile] You're determined to do it?

BLEANE If you *could* bring yourself to marry me, I'd try and give you a good time

BESSIE Well, I suppose that's a proposal

BLEANE I've never made one before, and it makes me a bit nervous

BESSIE You haven't said anything that I can answer yes or no to

BLEANE I don't want to say anything that you *can* answer no to

BESSIE [With a chuckle] Let me say that I'll think it over, may I?

BLEANE I'm going away to-morrow

BESSIE I'll give you an answer when you come back

BLEANE But that won't be for four weeks

BESSIE It'll give us both a chance to make up our minds
After all, it *is* rather a serious step You may come to
the conclusion that you don't really want to marry me

BLEANE There's no fear of that

BESSIE You're coming down to Kenton for the week-end
after you get back If you change your mind send Pearl
a wire putting yourself off I shall understand, and I
shan't be in the least hurt or offended

BLEANE Then it's good-bye till then

BESSIE Yes And thank you very much for wishing
to marry me

BLEANE Thank you very much for not refusing me outright
*[They shake hands and he goes out She walks over to
the window to look at him, glances at the watch on
her wrist, and then leaves the room In a moment
POLE shows in ARTHUR FENWICK He is a tall,
elderly man with a red face and grey hair.]*

POLE I'll tell her ladyship you're here, sir

FENWICK That'll be very good of you

*POLE goes out FENWICK takes a cigar from his case,
and the evening paper from a table, and settles himself
down comfortably to read and smoke He makes him-
self very much at home PEARL comes in*

PEARL Aren't Bessie and Harry Bleane here?

FENWICK No

PEARL That's very strange I wonder what can have
happened

FENWICK Never mind about Bessie and Harry Bleane Give
me your attention now

PEARL You're very late

FENWICK I like to come when I stand a chance of finding you alone, girlie

PEARL I wish you wouldn't call me girlie, Arthur I do hate it

FENWICK That's how I think of you When I'm present at one of your big set-outs, and watch you like a queen among all those lords and ambassadors and bigwigs, I just say to myself, She's my girlie, and I feel warm all over I'm so proud of you then You've got there, girlie, you've got there

PEARL [*Smiling*] You've been very kind to me, Arthur

FENWICK You've got brains, girlie, that's how you've done it It's brains Underneath your flighty ways and that casual air of yours, so that one might think you were just enjoying yourself and nothing more, I see you thinking it all out, pulling a string here and a string there, you've got them in the hollow of your hand all the time You leave nothing to chance, Pearl, you're a great woman

PEARL Not great enough to make you obey your doctor's orders

FENWICK [*Taking the cigar out of his mouth*] You're not going to ask me to throw away the first cigar I've had to-day?

PEARL To please me, Arthur They're so bad for you

FENWICK If you put it like that I must give in

PEARL I don't want you to be ill

FENWICK You've got a great heart, girlie The world just thinks you're a smart, fashionable woman, clever, brilliant, beautiful, a leader of fashion, but I know different I know you've got a heart of gold

PEARL You're a romantic old thing, Arthur

FENWICK My love for you is the most precious thing I have in the world You're my guiding star, you're my ideal

You stand to me for all that's pure and noble and clean in womanhood God bless you, girlie I don't know what I should do if you failed me I don't believe I could live if I ever found out that you weren't what I think you

PEARL [*With her tongue in her cheek*] You shan't, if I can help it

FENWICK You do care for me a little, girlie?

PEARL Of course I do

FENWICK I'm an old man, girlie

PEARL What nonsense! I look upon you as a mere boy

FENWICK [*Flattered*] Well, I expect a good many young men would be glad to have my physique I can work fourteen hours on end and feel as fresh as a daisy at the end of it

PEARL Your vitality is wonderful

FENWICK I sometimes wonder what it is that first drew you to me, girlie

PEARL I don't know I suppose it was the impression of strength you give

FENWICK Yes, I've often been told that It's very difficult for people to be with me long without realising that—well, that I'm not just the man in the street.

PEARL I always feel I can rely on you

FENWICK You couldn't have said anything to please me better I want you to rely on me I know you I'm the only man who's ever understood you I know that, deep down in that big, beating, human heart of yours, you're a timid, helpless little thing, with the innocence of a child, and you want a man like me to stand between you and the world My God, how I love you, girlie!

PEARL Take care, there's the butler

FENWICK Oh, damn it, there's always the butler

[POLE comes in with a telegram and a parcel of books]

PEARL [*Taking the telegram and glancing at the parcel*] What's that, Pole?

POLE They're books, my lady They've just come from Hatchard's

PEARL Oh, I know Undo them, will you? [POLE *cuts open the parcel and takes out a bundle of four or five books*

PEARL *opens the telegram*] Oh, bother! There's no answer, Pole

POLE Very good, my lady

[*Exit*

FENWICK Is anything the matter?

PEARL That fool Sturrey was dining here to-night, and he's just wired to say he can't come I do hate having my parties upset I'd asked ten people to meet him

FENWICK That's too bad

PEARL Pompous owl He's refused invitation after invitation I asked him six weeks ago this time, and he hadn't the face to say he was engaged

FENWICK Well, I'm afraid you must give him up I daresay you can do without him

PEARL Don't be a fool, Arthur I'll get hold of him somehow He may be Prime Minister one of these days [*She reflects a moment*] I wonder what his telephone number is [*She gets up and looks in a book, then sits down at the telephone*] Gerrard 7035 If he comes once because I force him to he'll come again because he likes it This house is like the kingdom of heaven I have to compel them to come in Is Lord Sturrey in? Lady Grayston I'll hold the line [*Making her voice sweet and charming*] Is that you, Lord Sturrey? It's Pearl Grayston speaking I just rang up to say it doesn't matter a bit about to-night Of course, I'm disappointed you can't come But you must come another day, will you? That's very nice of you How about this day week?

Oh, I'm sorry Would Thursday suit you? Oh! Well, how about Friday? You're engaged every evening next week? You are in demand Well, I'll tell you what, get your book and tell me what day you are free

FENWICK You're the goods, girlie You'll get there

PEARL Tuesday fortnight Yes, that'll suit me beautifully
8 30 I'm so glad you chose that day, because I'm having Kreisler in to play I shall look forward to seeing you Good-bye [*She puts down the receiver*] This time I've got him The ape thinks he understands music

FENWICK Have you got Kreisler for Tuesday fortnight?

PEARL No

FENWICK Are you sure you can get him?

PEARL No, but I'm sure you can

FENWICK You shall have him, girlie [*She takes the books that POLE brought in and puts them about the room One she places face downwards, open*] What are you doing that for?

PEARL They're Richard Twining's books He's coming to dinner to-night

FENWICK Why d'you trouble about authors, girlie?

PEARL London isn't like New York, you know People like to meet them over here

FENWICK I should have thought your position was quite strong enough to do without them

PEARL We live in a democratic age They take the place in society of the fools whom kings kept about their courts in the middle ages They have the advantage that they don't presume on their position to tell one home truths They're cheap A dinner and a little flattery is all they want And they provide their own clothes

FENWICK You litter up your house with their rotten books

PEARL Oh, but I don't keep them These are on approval
I shall send them all back to the bookseller to-morrow
morning

FENWICK Pearl, you're a little wonder When you want to
go into business you come to me and I'll take you into
partnership

PEARL How is business?

FENWICK Fine! I'm opening two new branches next week
They laughed at me when I first came over here They
said I'd go bankrupt I've turned their silly old methods
upside down He laughs longest who laughs last

PEARL [*Reflectively*] Ah, I can't help thinking that's what
my dressmaker said when she sent me in my bill

[*He gives a slight start and looks at her shrewdly He
sees her blandly smiling*]

FENWICK Girlie, you promised me you wouldn't run up
any more bills

PEARL That's like promising to love, honour, and obey
one's husband, the kind of undertaking no one is really
expected to carry out

FENWICK You naughty little thing

PEARL It's Suzanne—you know, the dressmaker in the
Place Vendôme The war has dislocated her business
and she wants to get her money in It isn't very con-
venient for me to pay just at present It's rather a large
sum [*She gives him a sheaf of typewritten documents*]

FENWICK This looks more like a five-act play than a bill

PEARL Clothes are expensive, aren't they? I wish I could
dress in fig-leaves It would be cheap, and I believe it
would suit me

FENWICK [*Putting the bill in his pocket*] Well, I'll see what
I can do about it

PEARL You are a duck, Arthur Would you like me
to come and lunch with you to-morrow?

FENWICK Why, sure

PEARL All right Now you must go, as I want to lie down before I dress for dinner

FENWICK That's right Take care of yourself, girlie, you're very precious to me

PEARL Good-bye, dear old thing

FENWICK Good-bye, girlie

[He goes out As he goes to the door the telephone rings]

PEARL takes up the receiver

PEARL You're speaking to Lady Grayston Tony! Of course I knew your voice Well, what is it? I'm not at all stern. I'm making my voice as pleasant as I can I'm sorry you find it disagreeable *[She gives a chuckle]* No, I'm afraid I couldn't come to tea to-morrow I shall be engaged all the afternoon. What is the day after to-morrow? *[Smiling]* Well, I must ask Bessie I don't know if she's free Of course I'm not coming alone It would be most compromising A nice-looking young man like you What would Minnie say? Oh, I know all about that I didn't promise anything I merely said the future was everybody's property A sleepless night Fancy! Well, good-bye Tony, do you know the most enchanting word in the English language? Perhaps

[She puts down the telephone quickly, and the curtain falls]

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The Scene is a morning-room at Abbots Kenton, the Graystons place in the country. It has an old-fashioned, comfortable look, nothing is very new, the chintzes are faded. Three long french windows lead on to a terrace.

It is after dinner, a fine night, and the windows are open.

The women of the party are sitting down, waiting for the men, they are PEARL and BESSIE, the DUCHESSE DE SURENNES and the PRINCESS DELLA CERCOLA.

PRINCESS You must be exhausted after all the tennis you played this afternoon, Minnie

DUCHESSE Not a bit. I only played four sets.

PRINCESS You played so vigorously. It made me quite hot to look at you.

DUCHESSE If I didn't take exercise I should be enormous. Oh, Flora, how I envy you! You can eat anything you choose and it has no effect on you. And what makes it so unfair is that you don't care about food. I am a lazy and a greedy woman. I never eat any of the things I like, and I never miss a day without taking at least an hour's exercise.

PRINCESS [*Smiling*] If mortification is the first step in sanctity, I'm sure you must be on the high road to it.

PEARL One of these days you'll give up the struggle, Minnie, and, like Flora, take to good works.

DUCHESSE [*With immense decision*] Never! I shall lie on my death-bed with my hair waved and a little rouge on my cheeks, and with my last breath murmur: Not gruel, it's so fattening.

PEARL Well, you'll have more serious tennis to-morrow
Harry Bleane plays much better than Thornton

DUCHESS It was very tiresome of him not to come till it
was just time to dress

PEARL He only got back from Rumania yesterday, and he
had to go down to see his mother [*With an amused
glance at her sister*] Bessie asked me not to put him next
her at dinner

BESSIE Pearl, you are a cat! I do think it's hateful the way
you discuss my private affairs with all and sundry

DUCHESS My dear Bessie, they've long ceased to be your
private affairs

PEARL I'm afraid Bessie misses her opportunities Just
before he went to Rumania I left them alone together,
and nothing happened All my tact was wasted

BESSIE Your tact was too obvious, Pearl

DUCHESS Well, do be quick and bring him to the scratch,
my dear I'm growing tired of people asking me, Is
he going to propose or is he not?

BESSIE Don't they ever ask, Is she going to accept him or
is she not?

DUCHESS Of course, you'll accept him

BESSIE I'm not so sure

PRINCESS [*Smiling*] Perhaps it depends on the way he asks

PEARL For heaven's sake, don't expect too much romance
Englishmen aren't romantic It makes them feel absurd
George proposed to me when he was in New York
for the Horse Show I wasn't very well that day, and
I was lying down I was looking a perfect fright He
told me all about a mare he had, and he told me all
about her father and her mother and her uncles and her
aunts, and then he said [*Imitating him*] Look here, you'd
better marry me.

PRINCESS How very sudden.

PEARL Oh, I said, why didn't you tell me you were going to propose? I'd have had my hair waved Poor George, he asked *Why?*

DUCHESS The French are the only nation who know how to make love When Gaston proposed to me he went down on his knees, and he took my hand, and he said he couldn't live without me Of course I knew that, because he hadn't a cent, but still it thrilled me He said I was his guiding star and his guardian angel—oh, I don't know what! It was beautiful! I knew he'd been haggling with papa for a fortnight about having his debts paid, but it was beautiful

PRINCESS Were you quite indifferent to him?

DUCHESS Oh, quite I'd made up my mind to marry a foreigner People weren't very nice to us in Chicago My cousin Mary had married the Count de Moret, and mother couldn't bear Aunt Alice She said, If Alice has got hold of a Count for Mary, I'm determined that you shall have a Duke

PEARL And you did

DUCHESS I wish you could have seen the fuss those Chicago people made of me when I went over last It was hard to realise that I used to cry my eyes out because I wasn't asked to the balls I wanted to go to

PRINCESS Still, I hope Bessie won't marry any man she doesn't care for

PEARL My dear, don't put ideas in the child's head The French are a much more civilised nation than we are, and they've come to the conclusion long ago that marriage is an affair of convenience rather than of sentiment Think of the people you know who've married for love After five years do they care for one another any more than the people who've married for money?

PRINCESS. They have the recollection,

PEARL Nonsense! As if anyone remembered an emotion when he no longer felt it!

DUCHESSÉ It's true I've been in love a dozen times, desperately, and when I've got over it and look back, though I remember I was in love, I can't for the life of me remember my love. It always seems to me so odd.

PEARL Believe me, Bessie, the flourishing state of father's hardware store is a much sounder basis for matrimonial happiness than any amount of passion.

BESSIE Oh, Pearl, what is this you've been telling people about dad selling bananas?

PEARL Bananas? Oh, I remember. They were saying that Mrs. Hanley used to wash the miners' clothes in California. That and her pearls are taking her everywhere. I wasn't going to be outdone, so I said father used to sell bananas in the streets of New York.

BESSIE He never did anything of the kind.

PEARL I know he didn't, but I thought people were getting rather tired of the hardware store, and I made a perfectly killing story out of it. I had a new Callot frock on and I thought I could manage the bananas.

DUCHESSÉ A most unpleasant vegetable. So fattening.
[*The men come in.* THORNTON CLAY, ARTHUR FENWICK, and FLEMING. PEARL and BESSIE get up.]

BESSIE You've been a long time.

DUCHESSÉ Where is Tony?

CLAY He and Bleane are finishing their cigars.

DUCHESSÉ Well, Mr. Harvey, are you still enjoying life in London?

CLAY He should be. I've got him invitations to all the nicest parties. But he will waste his time in sight-seeing. The other day—Thursday, wasn't it?—I wanted to take him to Hurlingham, and he insisted on going to the National Gallery instead.

PEARL [*Smiling*] What an outrageous proceeding!

FLEMING I don't see that it was any more outrageous for me than for you I saw you coming in just as I was going out

PEARL I had a reason to go Arthur Fenwick has just bought a Bronzino, and I wanted to see those in the National Gallery

DUCHESSE I think it's much more likely that you had an assignation I've always heard it's a wonderful place for that You never meet any of your friends, and if you do they're there for the same purpose, and pretend not to see you

FLEMING I certainly only went to see the pictures

CLAY But, good heavens, if you want to do that there's Christie's, and there you *will* meet your friends

FLEMING I'm afraid you'll never make a man of fashion out of me, Thornton

CLAY I'm beginning to despair You have a natural instinct for doing the wrong thing D'you know, the other day I caught him in the act of delivering half a bagful of letters of introduction? I implored him to put them in the waste-paper basket

FLEMING I thought as people had taken the trouble to give them to me, it was only polite to make use of them

CLAY Americans give letters so carelessly Before you know where you are you'll know all the wrong people And, believe me, the wrong people are very difficult to shake off

FLEMING [*Amused*] Perhaps some of my letters are to the right people

CLAY Then they'll take no notice of them

FLEMING It looks as though the wrong people had better manners than the right ones

CLAY The right people *are* rude They can afford to be

I was a very young man when I first came to London, and I made mistakes. All of us Americans make mistakes. It wanted a good deal of character to cut people who'd taken me about, asked me to dine, stay with them in the country, and heaven knows what, when I found they weren't the sort of people one ought to know.

PEARL Of course, one has to do it.

DUCHESS Of course. It shows that you have a nice nature, Thornton, to worry yourself about it.

CLAY I'm curiously sentimental. Another of our American faults. I remember when I'd been in London two or three years, I knew pretty well everyone that was worth knowing, but I'd never been asked to Hereford House. The duchess doesn't like Americans anyway, and she'd been very disagreeable about me in particular. But I was determined to go to her ball. I felt it wasn't the sort of function I could afford to be left out of.

PEARL They're very dull balls.

CLAY I know, but they're almost the only ones you can't go to without an invitation. Well, I found out that the duchess had a widowed sister who lived in the country with her two daughters. Lady Helen Blair. My dear, she was a very stuffy, dowdy woman of fifty-five, and her two daughters were stuffer and dowdier still, and if possible, older. They were in the habit of coming up to London for the season. I got introduced to them, and I laid myself out. I took them to the play, I showed them round the Academy, I stood them luncheons, I gave them cards for private views, for a month I worked like a Trojan. Then the duchess sent out her invitations, and the Blair girls had half a dozen cards for their young men. I received one, and, by George, I'd earned it. Of course, as soon as I got my invitation I dropped them, but you know I felt quite badly about it.

DUCHESSE I expect they're used to that

CLAY A strangely tactless woman, I ady Helen Blair She wrote and asked me if I was offended about anything because I never went near them

PEARL I wish those men would come, and then we could dance

DUCHESSE Oh, that'll be charming! It's such good exercise, isn't it? I'm told that you dance divinely, Mr Harvey

FLEMING I don't know about that I dance.

DUCHESSE [*To the PRINCESS*] Oh, my dear, who d'you think I danced with the other night? [*Impressively*] Ernest

PRINCESS Oh!

DUCHESSE My dear, don't say, Oh! like that Don't you know who Ernest is?

PEARL Ernest is the most sought after man in London

PRINCESS You don't mean the dancing-master?

DUCHESSE Oh, my dear, you mustn't call him that He'd be furious He isn't a professional He gives lessons at ten guineas an hour, but only to oblige He's invited to all the best dances

FLEMING One of the things that rather surprised me at balls was to see all these dancing-masters Do English girls like to be pawed about by Greeks, Dagos and Bowery tough?

CLAY You Americans who live in America, you're so prudish

DUCHESSE Believe me, I would go to *any* dance where there was the remotest chance of meeting Ernest It's a perfect dream to dance with him He showed me a new step, and I can't get it quite right I don't know what I shall do if I don't run across him again very soon

PRINCESS But why don't you let him give you a lesson?

DUCHESSE My dear, ten guineas an hour! I couldn't possibly afford that I'm sure to meet him at a dance in a day or two, and I shall get a lesson for nothing

PEARL You ought to make him fall in love with you

DUCHESSE Oh, my dear, if he only would! But he's so run after

[BLEANE and TONY PAXTON *come in from the terrace*]

DUCHESSE At last!

TONY We've been taking a stroll in the garden

PEARL I hope you showed him my tea-house

BESSIE It's Pearl's new toy You must be sure to admire it

PEARL I'm very proud of it You know, George won't let me do anything here He says it's his house, and he isn't going to have any of my muck He won't even have new chintzes Well, there was an old summer-house just over there, and it was all worm-eaten and horrid and tumble-down, what they call picturesque, but it was rather a nice place to go and have tea in as it had a really charming view, I wanted to pull it down and put up a smart Japanese tea-house instead, but George wouldn't hear of it, because, if you please, his mother—a peculiarly plain woman—used to sit and sew there Well, I bided my time, and the other day, when George was in London, I pulled down the old summer-house, got my Japanese tea-house down from town, put it up, and had everything finished by the time George came back twenty-four hours later He very nearly had an apoplectic stroke If he had I should have killed two birds with one stone

BESSIE Pearl!

PRINCESS I don't know why you've furnished it so elaborately

PEARL Well, I thought in the hot weather I'd sleep there sometimes It'll be just like sleeping in the open air

FENWICK These young people want to start dancing,
Pearl

PEARL Where would you like to dance, in here with the
gramophone, or in the drawing-room with the pianola?

BESSIE Oh, in the drawing-room

PEARL Let's go there then

BESSIE [*To CLAY*] Come and help me get the rolls out

CLAY Right you are

[*They go out, followed by the DUCHESS and PEARL,
TONY, FENWICK, and BLEANE*]

FLEMING [*To the PRINCESS*] Aren't you coming?

PRINCESS No, I think I'll stay here for the present But
don't bother about me You must go and dance

FLEMING There are enough men without me I'm sure
Thornton Clay is a host in himself

PRINCESS You don't like Thornton?

FLEMING He's been very kind to me since I came to
London

PRINCESS I was watching your face when he told that story
about the Hereford ball You must learn to conceal your
feelings better

FLEMING Didn't you think it was horrible?

PRINCESS I've known Thornton for ten years I'm used to
him And as you say yourself, he's very kind

FLEMING That's what makes life so difficult People don't
seem to be good or bad as the squares on a chessboard
are black or white Even the worthless ones have got
good traits, and it makes it so hard to know how to
deal with them

PRINCESS [*Smiling a little*] You don't approve of poor
Thornton?

FLEMING What do you expect me to think of a man who's
proud of having forced his way into a house where he

knew he wasn't wanted? He reckons success by the number of invitations he receives. He holds himself up to me as an example. He tells me that if I want to get into society, I must work for it. What do they think of a man like Thornton Clay in England? Don't they despise him?

PRINCESS Everywhere, in New York just as much as in London, there are masses of people struggling to get into society. It's so common a sight that one loses the sense of there being anything disgraceful in it. Pearl would tell you that English society is a little pompous, they welcome a man who can make them laugh. Thornton is very useful. He has high spirits, he's amusing, he makes a party go.

FLEMING I should have thought a man could find some better use for his life than that.

PRINCESS Thornton has plenty of money. Do you think there is any point in his spending his life making more? I sometimes think there's too much money in America already.

FLEMING There are things a man can do beside making money.

PRINCESS You know, American wealth has reached a pitch when it was bound to give rise to a leisured class. Thornton is one of the first members of it. Perhaps he doesn't play the part very well, but remember he hasn't had the time to learn it that they've had in Europe.

FLEMING [*Smiling*] I'm afraid you don't think me very charitable.

PRINCESS You're young. It's a real pleasure to me to know a nice clean American boy. And I'm so glad that you're not going to be dazzled by this English life that dazzles so many of our countrymen. Amuse yourself, learn what you can from it, take all the good it offers you and go back to America.

FLEMING I shall be glad to go back Perhaps I ought never to have come

PRINCESS I'm afraid you're not very happy

FLEMING I don't know what makes you think that

PRINCESS It's not very hard to see that you're in love with Bessie

FLEMING Did you know that I was engaged to her?

PRINCESS [*Surprised*] No

FLEMING I was engaged to her before I went to Harvard I was eighteen then, and she was sixteen

PRINCESS How very early in life you young people settle things in America!

FLEMING Perhaps it was rather silly and childish But when she wrote and told me that she thought we'd better break it off, I discovered I cared more than I thought

PRINCESS What did you say to her?

FLEMING I couldn't try to hold her to a promise she gave when she was a schoolgirl I answered that I sympathised and understood

PRINCESS When did this happen?

FLEMING A couple of months ago Then I got the chance to go over to Europe and I thought I'd come to see what was going on It didn't take me long to tumble

PRINCESS You're bearing it very well

FLEMING Oh, the only thing I could do was to be pleasant I should only have bored her if I'd made love to her She took our engagement as an amusing joke, and there wasn't anything for me to do but accept her view of it She was having the time of her life At first I thought perhaps she'd grow tired of all these balls and parties, and then if I was on the spot I might persuade her to come back to America with me

PRINCESS You may still

FLEMING No, I haven't a chance The first day I arrived she told me how wonderful she thought this English life She thinks it full and varied She thinks it has beauty

PRINCESS That sounds rather satirical

FLEMING Pearl has been very nice to me She's taken me about, I've driven with her constantly, I've sat in her box at the opera, I'm her guest at the moment If I had any decency I'd hold my tongue

PRINCESS Well?

FLEMING [*Bursting out impetuously*] There's something in these surroundings that makes me feel terribly uncomfortable Under the brilliant surface I suspect all kinds of ugly and shameful secrets that everyone knows and pretends not to This is a strange house in which the husband is never seen and Arthur Fenwick, a vulgar sensualist, acts as host, and it's an attractive spectacle, this painted duchess devouring with her eyes a boy young enough to be her son And the conversation—I don't want to seem a prude, I daresay people over here talk more freely than the people I've known, but surely there are women who don't have lovers, there are such things as honour and decency and self-restraint If Bessie is going to remain over here I wish to God she'd marry her lord at once and get out of it quickly

PRINCESS D'you think she'll be happy?

FLEMING Are they any of them happy? How can they expect to be happy when they marry for [*The PRINCESS gives a sudden start, and FLEMING stops short*] I beg your pardon I was forgetting Please forgive me You see, you're so different

PRINCESS I'm sorry I interrupted you What were you going to say?

FLEMING It wasn't of any importance You see, I've been thinking it over so much that it's rather got on my

nerves And I haven't been able to tell anyone what I was thinking about I'm dreadfully sorry

PRINCESS You were going to say, how can they expect to be happy when they marry for a trumpery title? You thought, they're snobs, vulgar snobs, and the misery of their lives is the proper punishment for their ignoble desires

FLEMING [*Very apologetically*] Princess

PRINCESS [*Ironically*] Princess

FLEMING Believe me, I hadn't the smallest intention of saying anything to wound you

PRINCESS You haven't It's too true Most of us who marry foreigners are merely snobs But I wonder if it's all our fault We're not shown a better way of life No one has even hinted to us that we have any duty towards our own country We're blamed because we marry foreigners, but columns are written about us in the papers, and our photographs are in all the magazines Our friends are excited and envious After all, we are human At first, when people addressed me as Princess, I couldn't help feeling thrilled Of course it was snobbishness

FLEMING You make me feel a terrible cad

PRINCESS But sometimes there've been other motives, too Has it ever occurred to you that snobbishness is the spirit of romance in a reach-me-down? I was only twenty when I married Marino I didn't see him as a fortune-hunting Dago, but as the successor of a long line of statesmen and warriors There'd been a pope in his family, and a dozen cardinals, one of his ancestors had been painted by Titian, for centuries they'd been men of war, with power of life and death, I'd seen the great feudal castle, with its hundred rooms, where they had ruled as independent sovereigns When Marino came and asked me to marry him it was romance that

stood in his shoes and beckoned to me I thought of the palace in Rome, which I had visited as a tripper, and where I might reign as mistress I thought it was splendid to take my place after all those great ladies, Orsinis, Colonnas, Gaetanis, Aldobrandinis I loved him

FLEMING But there's no need to tell me that you could never do anything from an unworthy motive

PRINCESS My husband's family had been ruined by speculation He was obliged to sell himself He sold himself for five million dollars And I loved him You can imagine the rest First he was indifferent to me, then I bored him, and at last he hated me Oh, the humiliation I endured When my child died I couldn't bear it any longer, I left him I went back to America I found myself a stranger I was out of place, the life had become foreign to me, I couldn't live at home I settled in England, and here we're strangers too I've paid very heavily for being a romantic girl

[BESSIE comes in]

BESSIE Really, Fleming, it's too bad of you to sit in here and flirt with the Princess We want you to come and dance

[The PRINCESS, agitated, gets up and goes out into the garden]

BESSIE [Looking after her] Is anything the matter?

FLEMING No

BESSIE Are you coming to dance, or are you not?

FLEMING I had quite a talk with Lord Bleane after dinner, Bessie

BESSIE [Smiling] Well?

FLEMING Are you going to accept the coronet that he's dangling before your eyes?

BESSIE It would be more to the point if you asked whether I'm going to accept the coronet that he's laying at my feet

FLEMING He's a very nice fellow, Bessie.

BESSIE I know that

FLEMING I wanted to dislike him

BESSIE Why?

FLEMING Well, I don't think much of these English lords who run after American girls for their money. I expected him to be a brainless loafer, with just enough cunning to know his market value, but he's a modest, unassuming fellow. To tell you the truth, I'm puzzled.

BESSIE [*Chaffing him*] Fancy that!

FLEMING I think it's a low-down thing that he's doing, and yet he doesn't seem a low-down fellow.

BESSIE He might be in love with me, you know.

FLEMING Is he?

BESSIE No.

FLEMING Are you going to marry him?

BESSIE I don't know.

FLEMING I suppose he's come here to ask you?

BESSIE [*After a short pause*] He asked me a month ago. I promised to give him an answer when he came back from Rumania. I'm in a panic. He's waiting to get me alone. I was able to be quite flippant about it when I had a month before me, but now, when I've got to say yes or no, I'm so jumpy I don't know what to do with myself.

FLEMING Don't marry him, Bessie.

BESSIE Why not?

FLEMING Well, first, you're no more in love with him than he is with you.

BESSIE And then?

FLEMING Isn't that enough?

BESSIE I wonder if you realise what he offers me. Do you know what the position of an English peeress is?

FLEMING Does it mean so much to be called Your Ladyship by tradesmen?

BESSIE You donkey, Fleming If I marry an American boy my life will be over if I marry Harry Bleane it will be only just beginning Look at Pearl I could do what she's done, I could do more, because George Grayston isn't ambitious I could make Harry do anything I liked He would go into politics, and I should have a salon Why, I could do anything

FLEMING [*Dryly*] I don't know why you should be in a panic You've evidently made up your mind You'll have a brilliant marriage with crowds outside the church, your photograph will be in all the papers, you'll go away for your honeymoon, and you'll come back What will you do then?

BESSIE Why, settle down

FLEMING Will you break your heart like the Princess because your husband has taken a mistress, or will you take lovers like the Duchesse de Surennes, or will you bore yourself to death like Pearl because your husband is virtuous, and wants you to do your duty?

BESSIE Fleming, you've got no right to say things like that to me

FLEMING I'm sorry if I've made you angry I had to say it

BESSIE Are you quite sure that it's for my sake you don't want me to marry Lord Bleane?

FLEMING Yes, I think it is When you broke off our engagement I didn't blame you You wouldn't have done it if you'd cared for me, and it wasn't your fault if you didn't When I came over I saw that I could expect nothing but friendship from you You must do me the justice to acknowledge that during this month I haven't given the smallest sign that I wanted anything else

BESSIE Oh, you've been charming You always were the best friend I've had

FLEMING If in a corner of my heart I kept my love for you, that is entirely my affair I don't know that it puts you to any inconvenience, and it pleases me I'm quite sure that I'm only thinking now of your happiness Go back to America, and fall in love with some nice fellow, and marry him You'll have all my best wishes Perhaps your life won't be so brilliant or so exciting, but it will be simpler and wholesomer, and more becoming

BESSIE You're a dear, Fleming, and if I said anything disagreeable just now, forgive me I didn't mean it I shall always want you to be my dearest friend

[LORD BLEANE enters from the terrace]

BLEANE I was looking for you everywhere I wondered where you'd got to

[There is a moment's pause FLEMING HARVEY looks from BESSIE to BLEANE]

FLEMING I really must go and dance with the Duchesse or she'll never forgive me

BLEANE I've just been dancing with her My dear fellow, it's the most violent form of exercise I've ever taken

FLEMING I'm in very good condition.

[He goes out]

BLEANE Blessings on him.

BESSIE Why?

BLEANE Because he's left us alone Ask me another

BESSIE I don't think I will

BLEANE Then I'll ask you one

BESSIE Please don't Tell me all about Rumania

BLEANE Rumania is a Balkan State Its capital is Bucharest It has long been known for its mineral springs

BESSIE You're in very high spirits to-night

BLEANE You may well wonder Everything has conspired to depress them

BESSIE Oh, what nonsense!

BLEANE First I was in England thirty-six hours before I had a chance of seeing you, secondly, when I arrived you'd already gone up to dress, then, when I was expecting to sit next you at dinner, I was put between Lady Grayston and the Princess, and, lastly, you made me pound away at that beastly pianola when I wanted to dance with you

BESSIE Well, you've survived it all

BLEANE What I want to point out to you is that if notwithstanding I'm in high spirits, I must have a most engaging nature

BESSIE I never dreamt of denying it

BLEANE So much to the good

BESSIE The man's going to propose to me

BLEANE No, I'm not

BESSIE I beg your pardon My mistake

BLEANE I did that a month ago

BESSIE There's been a change of moon since then, and no proposal holds good after the new moon

BLEANE I never knew that

BESSIE You've been down to see your mother

BLEANE She sends you her love

BESSIE Have you told her?

BLEANE I told her a month ago

[BESSIE does not speak for a moment, when she answers
it is more gravely]

BESSIE You know, I want to be frank with you You won't think it disagreeable of me, will you? I'm not in love with you

BLEANE I know But you don't positively dislike me?

BESSIE No I like you very much

BLEANE Won't you risk it then?

BESSIE [*Almost tragically*] I can't make up my mind

BLEANE I'll do all I can to make you happy I'll try not to make a nuisance of myself

BESSIE I know quite well that I wouldn't marry you if you weren't who you are, and I'm afraid I know that you wouldn't marry me if I hadn't a certain amount of money

BLEANE Oh, yes, I would

BESSIE It's nice of you to say so

BLEANE Don't you believe it?

BESSIE I suppose I'm a perfect fool I ought to play the game prettily You see, I know that you can't afford to marry a girl who isn't well-to-do Everyone knows what I have Pearl has taken good care that they should You wouldn't ever have thought of me otherwise We're arranging a deal You give your title and your position, and I give my money It's a commonplace thing enough, but somehow it sticks in my throat

[BLEANE *hesitates a moment, and walks up and down thinking*]

BLEANE You make me feel an awful swine The worst of it is that some part of what you say is true I'm not such a fool that I didn't see your sister was throwing us together I don't want to seem a conceited ass, but a fellow in my sort of position can't help knowing that many people think him rather a catch Mothers of marriageable daughters are very transparent sometimes, you know, and if they don't marry their daughters they're determined it shan't be for want of trying

BESSIE Oh, I can quite believe that I have noticed it in American mothers, too

BLEANE I knew it would be a good thing if I married you I don't suppose I should have thought about you if I

hadn't been told you were pretty well off It's beastly now, saying all that

BESSIE I don't see why

BLEANE Because after a bit I found out I'd fallen in love with you And then I didn't care if you hadn't got a bob I wanted to marry you because—because I didn't know what to do without you

BESSIE Harry!

BLEANE Do believe me I swear it's true I don't care a hang about the money After all, we could get along without it And I love you

BESSIE It's very good to hear you say that I'm so absurdly pleased and flattered

BLEANE You do believe it, don't you?

BESSIE Yes

BLEANE And will you marry me?

BESSIE If you like

BLEANE Of course I like [*He takes her in his arms and kisses her*]

BESSIE Take care, someone might come in

BLEANE [*Smiling and happy*] Come into the garden with me

[He stretches out his hand, she hesitates a moment, smiles, takes it, and together they go out on to the terrace]

For a moment the music of a one-step is heard more loudly, and then the DUCHESS and TONY PAXTON come in She sinks into a chair fanning herself, and he goes over to a table, takes a cigarette, and lights it

DUCHESS Did you see? That was Harry Bleane and Bessie I wondered where they were

TONY You've got eyes like a lynx

DUCHESS I'm positive they were hand in hand

TONY It looks as if she'd worked it at last

DUCHESS I don't know about that It looks as if he'd worked it

TONY She's not such a catch as all that If I were a peer I'd sell myself for a damned sight more than eight thousand a year

DUCHESS Don't stand so far away, Tony Come and sit on the sofa by me

TONY [*Going over to her*] I say, I've been talking to Bleane about two-seaters

DUCHESS [*Very coldly*] Oh!

TONY [*Giving her a look out of the corner of his eye*] He says I can't do better than get a Talbot

DUCHESS I don't see why you want a car of your own You can always use one of mine

TONY That's not the same thing After all, it won't cost much I can get a ripper for just over twelve hundred pounds, with a really smart body

DUCHESS You talk as though twelve hundred pounds were nothing at all

TONY Hang it all, it isn't anything to you

DUCHESS What with the income tax and one thing and another, I'm not so terribly flush just now No one knows the claims I have on me Because one has a certain amount of money one's supposed to be made of it They don't realise that if one spends it in one way one can't spend it in another It cost me seven thousand pounds to have my house redecorated

TONY [*Sulkily*] You said I could buy myself a car

DUCHESS I said I'd think about it I wasn't under the impression that you'd go and order one right away

TONY I've practically committed myself now

DUCHESS You only want a car so that you can be independent of me

TONY Well, hang it all, you can't expect me to be tied to your apron-strings always It's a bit thick if whenever I want to take a man down to play golf I have to ring up and ask if I can have one of your cars It makes me look such an ass

DUCHESSE If it's only to play golf you want it, I'm sure anyone would rather go down to the links in a comfortable Rolls-Royce than in a two-seater

[*A silence*]

TONY If you don't want to give me a car, why on earth did you say you would?

DUCHESSE [*Putting her hand on him*] Tony

TONY For goodness' sake don't touch me.

DUCHESSE [*Hurt and mortified*] Tony!

TONY I don't want to force you to make me presents I can quite well do without a two-seater I can go about in omnibuses if it comes to that

DUCHESSE Don't you love me?

TONY I wish you wouldn't constantly ask me if I love you It is maddening

DUCHESSE Oh, how can you be so cruel to me!

TONY [*Exasperated*] D'you think this is quite the best place to choose to make a scene?

DUCHESSE I love you with all my heart I've never loved anybody as much as I love you

TONY No man could stand being loved so much D'you think it's jolly for me to feel that your eyes are glued on me whatever I'm doing? I can never put my hand out without finding yours there ready to press it

DUCHESSE I can't help it if I love you That's my temperament

TONY Yes, but you needn't show it so much Why don't you leave me to do the love-making?

DUCHESSÉ If I did that there wouldn't be any love-making

TONY You make me look such a fool

DUCHESSÉ Don't you know there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you?

TONY [*Quickly*] Well, why don't you marry me?

DUCHESSÉ [*With a gasp*] I can't do that You know that I can't do that

TONY Why not? You could still call yourself Duchesse de Surennes

DUCHESSÉ No, I've always told you nothing would induce me to marry

TONY That shows how much you love me

DUCHESSÉ Marriage is so middle-class It takes away all the romance of love

TONY You simply want to have your freedom and keep me bound hand and foot D'you think it's jolly for me to know what people say about me? After all, I have got some pride

DUCHESSÉ I'm sure we shall be able to get you a job soon, and then no one will be able to say anything

TONY I'm getting fed up with the whole business, I tell you that straight I'd just as soon chuck it

DUCHESSÉ Tony, you don't mean to say you want to leave me I'll kill myself if you do I couldn't bear it, I couldn't bear it I'll kill myself

TONY For God's sake, don't make such a row

DUCHESSÉ Say you don't mean it, Tony I shall scream

TONY After all, I've got my self-respect to think of It seems to me the best thing would be if we put a stop to the whole thing now

DUCHESSÉ Oh, I can't lose you I can't

TONY No one can say I'm mercenary, but hang it all, one has to think of one's future I shan't be twenty five for ever I ought to be settling down

DUCHESSHE Don't you care for me any more?

TONY Of course I care for you If I didn't, d'you think I'd have let you do all you have for me?

DUCHESSHE Then why d'you make me so unhappy?

TONY I don't want to make you unhappy, but really sometimes you are unreasonable

DUCHESSHE You mean about the car?

TONY I wasn't thinking about the car then.

DUCHESSHE You can have it if you like

TONY I don't want it now

DUCHESSHE Tony, don't be unkind

TONY I'm not going to take any more presents from you

DUCHESSHE I didn't mean to be unreasonable I'd like you to have the car, Tony I'll give you a cheque for it to-morrow [*Coaxingly*] Tell me what the body's like

TONY [*Sulkily*] Oh, it's a torpedo body

DUCHESSHE You'll take me for drives in it sometimes?

[*He turns round and looks at her, she puts out her hand, he thaws, and smiles engagingly*]

TONY I say, you are awfully kind to me

DUCHESSHE You do like me a little, don't you?

TONY Of course I do

DUCHESSHE You have a good heart, Tony Kiss me

TONY [*Kissing her, pleased and excited*] I saw an awfully jolly body in a shop in Trafalgar Square the day before yesterday I've got half a mind to get the people who made your body to copy it

DUCHESSHE Why don't you get it at the shop you saw it at? My people are terribly expensive, and they aren't any better than anybody else

TONY Well, you see, I don't know anything about the firm
I just happened to catch sight of it as I was passing

DUCHESS What on earth were you doing in Trafalgar
Square on Thursday? I thought you were going to
Ranelagh

TONY I was put off I hadn't got anything to do, so I
thought I'd just slope round the National Gallery for
half an hour

DUCHESS That's the last place I should have expected you
to go to

TONY I don't mind having a look at pictures now and
then

*[A sudden suspicion comes to the DUCHESS that he was
there with PEARL, but she makes no sign that he
can see]*

DUCHESS *[Blandly]* Did you look at the Bronzinos?

TONY *[Falling into the trap]* Yes Arthur Fenwick bought
one the other day at Christie's He paid a devil of a
price for it too

DUCHESS *[Clenching her hands in the effort to hide her agita-
tion]* Oh?

TONY I do think it's rot, the prices people pay for old
masters I'm blowed if I'd give ten thousand pounds
for a picture

DUCHESS We'll go to the National Gallery together one
of these days, shall we?

TONY I don't know that I want to make a habit of it, you
know

*[PEARL and THORNTON CLAY come in During the
conversation the DUCHESS surreptitiously watches
PEARL and TONY for signs of an intelligence between
them]*

PEARL I've got great news for you Bessie and Harry
Bleane are engaged

DUCHESS Oh, my dear, I'm so glad How gratified you must be!

PEARL Yes, I'm delighted You must come and congratulate them

CLAY Above all we must congratulate one another We've all worked for it, Pearl

TONY He hadn't much chance, poor blighter, had he?

PEARL We're going to have one more dance, and then Arthur wants to play poker You must come

CLAY [*To the DUCHESS*] Will you dance this with me, Minnie?

DUCHESS I'd like to

[*CLAY gives her his arm She throws TONY and PEARL a glance, and purses her lips She goes out with CLAY*]

PEARL You haven't danced with me yet, Tony You should really pay some attention to your hostess

TONY I say, don't go

PEARL Why not?

TONY Because I want to talk to you

PEARL [*Flippantly*] If you want to whisper soft nothings in my ear, you'll find the one-step exceedingly convenient

TONY You're a little beast, Pearl

PEARL You've been having a long talk with Minnie

TONY Oh, she's been making me a hell of a scene

PEARL Poor thing, she can't help it She adores you.

TONY I wish she didn't, and you did

PEARL [*With a chuckle*] My dear, it's your only attraction for me that she adores you Come and dance with me

TONY You've got a piece of hair out of place

PEARL Have I? [*She takes a small glass out of her bag and looks at herself As she does so TONY steps behind her and kisses her neck*] You fool, don't do that Anyone might see us

TONY I don't care

PEARL I do Arthur's as jealous as cats' meat

TONY Arthur's playing the pianola

PEARL There's nothing wrong with my hair

TONY Of course there isn't You're perfectly divine
to-night I don't know what there is about you

PEARL You're a foolish creature, Tony

TONY Let's go in the garden

PEARL No, they'll be wondering where we are

TONY Hang it all, it's not so extraordinary to take a stroll
instead of dancing

PEARL I don't want to take a stroll

TONY Pearl

PEARL Yes?

[She looks at him For a moment they stare at one another in silence A hot flame of passion leaps up suddenly between them, and envelops them, so that they forget everything but that they are man and woman The air seems all at once heavy to breathe PEARL, like a bird in a net, struggles to escape, their voices sink, and unconsciously they speak in whispers]

PEARL Don't be a fool, Tony

TONY [*Hoarsely*] Let's go down to the tea-house

PEARL No, I won't

TONY We shall be quite safe there.

PEARL I daren't It's too risky

TONY Oh, damn the risk!

PEARL [*Agitated*] I can't!

TONY I'll go down there and wait

PEARL [*Breathlessly*] But—if they wonder where I am

TONY They'll think you've gone up to your room

PEARL I won't come, Tony

TONY I'll wait for you

[As he goes out, ARTHUR FENWICK comes in PEARL gives a slight start, but quickly recovers herself]

FENWICK Look here, I'm not going on pounding away at that wretched pianola unless you come and dance, Pearl

PEARL *[Exhausted]* I'm tired, I don't want to dance any more

FENWICK Poor child, you look quite pale

PEARL Do I? I thought I'd put plenty of rouge on. Am I looking revolting?

FENWICK You always look adorable You're wonderful I can't think what you see in an old fellow like me

PEARL You're the youngest man I've ever known.

FENWICK How well you know the thing to say to please me!

[He is just going to take her in his arms, but instinctively she draws back]

PEARL Let's play poker now, shall we?

FENWICK Not if you're tired, darling

PEARL I'm never too tired for that

FENWICK You don't know how I adore you It's a privilege to be allowed to love you

PEARL *[Sure of herself again]* Oh, what nonsense! You'll make me vain if you say things like that

FENWICK You do love me a little, don't you? I want your love so badly

PEARL Why, I dote on you, you silly old thing

[She takes his face in her hands and kisses him, avoids his arms that seek to encircle her, and goes towards the door]

FENWICK Where are you going?

PEARL I'm just going to my room to arrange my face

FENWICK My God, how I love you, girl! There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you.

PEARL Really?

FENWICK Nothing

PEARL Then ring for Pole and tell him to set out the card-table and bring the counters

FENWICK And I was prepared to give you a sable coat or a diamond tiara

PEARL I much prefer chinchilla and emeralds

FENWICK [*Taking her hand*] Must you really go and arrange your face?

PEARL Really!

FENWICK Be quick then I can hardly bear you out of my sight [*He kisses her hand*]

PEARL [*Looking at him tenderly*] Dear Arthur

[*She goes out FENWICK rings the bell Then he goes on the terrace and calls out*]

FENWICK Thornton, we're going to play poker Get them to come along, will you?

CLAY [*Outside*] Right-ho!

[*POLE comes in*]

FENWICK Oh, Pole, get the card-table ready

POLE Very good, sir

FENWICK And we shall want the counters Let's have those mother-o'-pearl ones that I brought down last time I was here

POLE Very good, sir

[*The PRINCESS comes in POLE proceeds to bring a card-table into the centre of the room and unfolds it He gets a box of counters out of a drawer, and puts them on the table*]

FENWICK Pearl has just gone to her room. She'll be here in one minute

PRINCESS [*Looking at the preparations*] This looks like more dissipation

FENWICK We were going to have a little game of poker I don't think we ought to play very long, Pearl is looking terribly tired

PRINCESS I don't wonder She's so energetic

FENWICK She does too much Just now when I came in she was quite white I'm really very uneasy about her You see, she never spares herself

PRINCESS Fortunately she's extremely strong

FENWICK She has a constitution of iron She's a very wonderful woman It's very seldom you meet a woman like Pearl She's got a remarkable brain I've frequently discussed business with her, and I've been amazed at her clear grasp of complicated matters I owe a great deal to her And she's good, Princess, she's good She's got a heart of gold

PRINCESS I'm sure she has

FENWICK She'll always do a good turn to anybody She's the most generous, the most open-handed woman I've ever met

[*The DUCHESS comes in as he says these words*]

DUCHESSE Who is this?

FENWICK We were talking of our hostess

DUCHESSE I see

[*She has her bag in her hand, when the others are not looking she hides it behind a sofa*]

FENWICK I have no hesitation in saying that Pearl is the most remarkable woman in England Why, she's got half the Cabinet in her pocket She's very powerful

DUCHESSE I have often thought that if she'd lived in the reign of Charles II she would have been a duchess in her own right

FENWICK [*Innocently*] Maybe She would adorn any sphere
She's got everything—tact, brains, energy, beauty

DUCHESS Virtue

FENWICK If I were the British people, I'd make her Prime
Minister

PRINCESS [*Smiling*] You're an excellent friend, Mr
Fenwick

FENWICK Of course, you've heard of her hostel for young
women alone in London?

DUCHESS [*Sweetly*] Yes, there was a great deal about it in
the papers, wasn't there?

FENWICK That's a thing I've always admired in Pearl She
has a thoroughly modern understanding of the value of
advertisement

DUCHESS Yes, she has, hasn't she?

FENWICK Well, believe me, she conceived the idea of that
hostel, built it, endowed it, organised it, all on her own
It cost twenty thousand pounds

DUCHESS But surely, Mr Fenwick, you paid the twenty
thousand pounds Pearl hasn't got sums like that to
throw away on charity

FENWICK I gave the money, but the money isn't the
important thing The idea, the organisation, the success,
are all due to Pearl

DUCHESS It has certainly been one of the best advertised of
recent philanthropic schemes

[THORNTON CLAY, BESSIE, BLEANE and FLEMING
come in]

CLAY We're all dying to play poker.

FENWICK The table is ready

BESSIE Where is Pearl?

FENWICK She's gone to her room She'll be back in a
minute

[*They gather round the table and sit down.*]

BESSIE You're going to play, Princess?

PRINCESS Oh, I don't think so, I'll look on I'm going to bed in a minute

BESSIE Oh, you must play

[*The PRINCESS smiles, shrugs her shoulders and approaches the table*]

FENWICK Leave a place for Pearl

DUCHESS You must leave one for Tony, too

CLAY What's he doing?

DUCHESS He'll be here presently

FENWICK Shall I give out the counters? What would you like to play for?

PRINCESS Don't let it be too high

DUCHESS How tiresome of you, Flora! I think I'm in luck to-night

FENWICK We don't want to ruin anyone Shilling antes Will that suit you?

PRINCESS Very well

FENWICK [*To CLAY*] The whites are a shilling, Thornton, reds two, and blues five bob Mr Harvey, you might count some out, will you?

FLEMING Sure

[*The three of them start counting out the counters*]

DUCHESS Oh, how stupid of me, I haven't got my bag

FENWICK Never mind, we'll trust you

DUCHESS Oh, I'd rather pay at once It saves so much bother Besides, I hate not having my bag

PRINCESS One always wants to powder one's nose if one hasn't got it

DUCHESS Bessie dear, I left it in Pearl's new tea-house Do run and fetch it for me.

BESSIE Certainly

BLEANE No, I'll go

BESSIE You don't know the way I can go through the bushes It's only twenty yards You stop and count out the counters

[She goes out]

FENWICK There's five pounds here Will you take them, Princess?

PRINCESS Thank you Here's my money

DUCHESS I'll give you my fiver as soon as Bessie brings my bag

CLAY How on earth came you to leave it in the tea-house?

DUCHESS I'm so careless I'm always leaving my bag about

FLEMING Here's another five pounds

PRINCESS What beautiful counters they are!

FENWICK I'm glad you like them I gave them to Pearl They've got her initials on them

CLAY Let's have a hand before Pearl comes Lowest deals
[They all cut]

FLEMING Table stakes, I suppose?

FENWICK Oh yes, it makes it a much better game

CLAY Your deal, Fenwick

FENWICK Ante up, Princess

PRINCESS I beg your pardon

[She pushes forward a counter FENWICK deals The others take up their cards]

FENWICK Two shillings to come in.

FLEMING I'm coming in

BLEANE I always come in

FENWICK I oughtn't to, but I shall all the same. Are you going to make good your ante, Princess?

PRINCESS I may just as well, mayn't I?

FENWICK That's how I've made a fortune By throwing
good money after bad Would you like a card?

PRINCESS I'll have three

[FENWICK gives them to her]

CLAY The Princess has got a pair of deuces

FLEMING I'll have one

[FENWICK gives it to him]

BLEANE One never gets that straight, Harvey I'll take five

FENWICK That's what I call a real sport

CLAY Nonsense It just means he can't play

BLEANE It would be rather a sell for you if I got a flush

CLAY It would, but you haven't

[FENWICK has given him cards and BLEANE looks at them]

BLEANE You're quite right I haven't

[He flings them down Through the next speeches the
business with the cards follows the dialogue]

FENWICK Don't you want any cards, Duchesse?

DUCHESS No, I'm out of it

CLAY I'll have three I thought you were in luck.

DUCHESS Wait a minute You'll be surprised.

FENWICK Dealer takes two

CLAY Who bets?

PRINCESS I'm out of it

CLAY I said it was a pair of deuces

FLEMING I'll bet five shillings

CLAY I'll take it and raise five shillings

FENWICK I suppose I must risk my money What have I
got to put down? Ten shillings?

FLEMING There's five shillings, and I'll raise you five
shillings more.

CLAY No, I've had enough.

FENWICK I'll take you and raise you again.

FLEMING Very well And once more.

FENWICK I'll see you

[BESSIE comes in *The DUCHESS has been watching for her BESSIE is excessively disturbed*

DUCHESSE Ah, there's Bessie

FENWICK [To FLEMING] What have you got?

DUCHESSE Did you find my bag?

BESSIE [With a gasp] No, it wasn't there.

DUCHESSE Oh, but I remember distinctly leaving it there
I'll go and look for it myself Mr Fenwick, will you come with me

BESSIE No, don't—you can't go into the tea-house

PRINCESS [Surprised] Bessie, is anything the matter?

BESSIE [In a strained voice] The door of the tea-house is locked

DUCHESSE Oh, it can't be I saw Pearl and Tony go in there just now

[BESSIE suddenly hides her face and bursts into a flood of tears

PRINCESS [Starting to her feet] Minnie, you devil! What have you been doing?

DUCHESSE Don't ask what I've been doing

FENWICK You must be mistaken Pearl went up to her room

DUCHESSE Go and look for her.

[FENWICK is about to start from his chair *The PRINCESS puts her hand on his shoulders*

PRINCESS Where are you going?

DUCHESSE I saw her

[For a moment there is a pause

CLAY [In an embarrassed way] Well, we'd better go on with our game, hadn't we?

[*The PRINCESS and BLEANE are bending over BESSIE, trying to get her to control herself*]

FLEMING That was your money, Mr Fenwick

FENWICK [*Staring in front of him, with a red face and blood-shot eyes, under his breath*] The slut The slut

[*The DUCHESSE takes her bag from behind the cushion, gets out the stick for her lips, and her mirror, and begins to paint them*]

CLAY You'd better deal, Fleming The Princess won't play, I expect

DUCHESSE Deal me cards I want to play

CLAY Bleane, come on We'd better go on with our game
Take Bessie's chips

[*BLEANE comes forward FLEMING deals the cards A stormy silence hangs over the party, broken only by the short speeches referring to the game, they play trying to relieve the tension They are all anxiously awaiting PEARL, afraid she will come, knowing she must, and dreading the moment, they are nervous and constrained*]

CLAY Your ante, Bleane

[*BLEANE puts forward a counter The cards are dealt in silence*]

CLAY I'm coming in

[*FENWICK looks at his cards, puts forward a couple of counters, but does not speak FLEMING puts forward counters*]

FLEMING D'you want a card?

BLEANE Three, please

CLAY Two

FENWICK [*With an effort over himself*] I'll have three

[*FLEMING deals them as they ask Just as he has given FENWICK his, PEARL comes in, followed by TONY TONY is smoking a cigarette*]

PEARL Oh, have you started already?

FENWICK [*Violently*] Where have you been?

PEARL I? My head was aching a little and I went for a turn in the garden. I found Tony composing a sonnet to the moon.

FENWICK You said you were going to your room.

PEARL What are you talking about?

[*She looks round, sees the DUCHESSE's look of angry triumph, and gives a slight start*]

DUCHESSE Once too often, my dear, once too often.

[*PEARL takes no notice. She sees BESSIE. BESSIE has been staring at her with miserable eyes, and now she hides her face. PEARL realises that everything is discovered. She turns coolly to TONY*]

PEARL You damned fool, I told you it was too risky.

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

The SCENE is the same as in the last act, the morning-room at Kenton

It is next day, Sunday, about three in the afternoon, and the sun is shining brightly

The PRINCESS, THORNTON CLAY and FLEMING are sitting down FLEMING lights another cigarette

PRINCESS Is it good for you to smoke so many cigarettes?

FLEMING I shouldn't think so

CLAY He must do something

PRINCESS Perhaps you can get up a game of tennis later on

FLEMING It's very hot for tennis

CLAY Besides, who will play?

PRINCESS You two could have a single

CLAY If we only had the Sunday papers it would be something

PRINCESS You can hardly expect them in a place like this
I don't suppose there are many trains on Sunday

CLAY I wonder if dinner is going to be as cheerful as luncheon was

FLEMING Did Pearl send any explanation for not appearing at luncheon?

PRINCESS I haven't an idea

CLAY I asked the butler where she was He said she was
lunching in bed I wish I'd thought of that

PRINCESS I'm afraid we were rather silent

CLAY Silent! I shall never forget that luncheon Minnie
subdued—and silent Tony sulky—and silent Bessie

frightened—and silent Bleane embarrassed—and silent
Fenwick furious—and silent I tried to be pleasant and
chatty It was like engaging the pyramids in small-talk
Both of you behaved very badly You might have given
me a little encouragement

FLEMING I was afraid of saying the wrong thing The
Duchesse and Bessie looked as if they'd burst into tears
on the smallest provocation

PRINCESS I was thinking of Pearl What a humiliation!
What a horrible humiliation!

FLEMING What d'you think she'll do now?

CLAY That's what I'm asking myself I have an idea that
she won't appear again till we're all gone

PRINCESS I hope she won't She's always so sure of herself,
I couldn't bear to see her pale and mortified

CLAY She's got plenty of courage

PRINCESS I know She may force herself to face us It
would be a dreadful ordeal for all of us

FLEMING D'you think she's feeling it very much?

PRINCESS She wouldn't be human if she weren't I don't
suppose she slept any better last night than the rest of us
Poor thing, she must be a wreck

FLEMING It was a terrible scene

PRINCESS I shall never forget it The things that Minnie
said I couldn't have believed such language could issue
from a woman's throat Oh, it was horrible

CLAY It was startling I've never seen a woman so beside
herself And there was no stopping her

FLEMING. And with Bessie there

PRINCESS She was crying so much, I doubt if she heard

CLAY I was thankful when Minnie had the hysterics and we
were able to fuss over her and dab her face and slap her
hands It was a very welcome diversion.

FLEMING Does she have attacks like that often?

CLAY I know she did when the young man before Tony married an heiress I think she has one whenever there's a crisis in the affairs of her heart

FLEMING For goodness' sake, Thornton, don't talk about it as if it were a joke

CLAY [*Surprised*] What's the matter, Fleming?

FLEMING I think it's abominable to treat the whole thing so flippantly

CLAY Why, I was very sympathetic I wasn't flippant Who got the sal volatile? I got the sal volatile

FLEMING [*With a shrug of the shoulders*] I daresay my nerves are a bit on edge You see, before, I only thought things were rather queer It's come as, well, as a shock to discover exactly what the relations are between all these people And what I can't very easily get over is to realise that I'm the only member of the party who doesn't take it as a matter of course

CLAY We shall never make a man of the world of you, Fleming

FLEMING I'm afraid that didn't sound very polite, Princess I beg your pardon

PRINCESS I should have few friends if I demanded the standard that you do I've learned not to judge my neighbours

FLEMING Is it necessary to condone their vices?

PRINCESS You don't understand It's not entirely their fault It's the life they lead They've got too much money and too few responsibilities English women in our station have duties that are part of their birthright, but we, strangers in a strange land, have nothing to do but enjoy ourselves

FLEMING Well, I thank God Bleane is a decent man, and he'll take Bessie out of all this

[*The DUCHESS comes in Unlike the PRINCESS, who is in a summer frock, suitable for the country, the DUCHESS wears a town dress and a hat*

PRINCESS You've been changing your frock, Minnie

DUCHESS Yes I'm leaving this house in half an hour I'd have gone this morning, if I'd been able to get away I always thought it a detestable hole, but now that I've discovered there are only two trains on Sunday, one at nine, and the other at half-past four, I have no words to express my opinion of it

CLAY Yet you have an extensive vocabulary, Minnie

DUCHESS I've been just as much a prisoner as if I'd been shut up with lock and key I've been forced to eat that woman's food I thought every mouthful would choke me

PRINCESS Do keep calm, Minnie You know how bad it is for you to upset yourself

DUCHESS As soon as I found there wasn't a train I sent over to the garage and said I wanted to be taken to London at once Would you believe it, I couldn't get a car

CLAY Why not?

DUCHESS One of the cars went up to town early this morning, and the other is being overhauled There's nothing but a luggage cart I couldn't go to London in a luggage cart As it is I shall have to go to the station in it I shall look ridiculous

CLAY Have you ordered it?

DUCHESS Yes It's to be round at the door in a few minutes

CLAY What on earth can Pearl have sent the car up to London for?

DUCHESS To show her spite

PRINCESS That's not like her.

DUCHESSE My dear, she's been my greatest friend for fifteen years I know her through and through, and I tell you that she hasn't got a single redeeming quality And why does she want to have the car overhauled to-day? When you're giving a party the least you can do is to see that your cars are in running order

PRINCESS Oh, well, that was an accident You can't blame her for that

DUCHESSE I only have one thing to be thankful for, and that is that she has had the decency to keep to her room I will be just It shows at least that she has some sense of shame

CLAY You know, Minnie, Pearl has a good heart She didn't mean to cause you pain

DUCHESSE Are you trying to excuse her, Thornton?

CLAY No, I think her conduct is inexcusable

DUCHESSE So do I I mean to have nothing more to do with her It's a judgment on me I disliked her the first time I saw her One should always trust one's first impressions Now my eyes are opened I will never speak to her again I will cut her dead I hope you'll tell her that, Thornton.

CLAY If that's a commission you're giving me, it's not a very pleasant one

PRINCESS Will you let me have a word or two with Minnie?

CLAY Why, of course Come along, Fleming

[CLAY and FLEMING HARVEY go into the garden]

DUCHESSE My dear, if you're going to ask me to turn the other cheek, don't Because I'm not going to I'm going to do all I can to revenge myself on that woman I'm going to expose her I'm going to tell everyone how she's treated me When I was her guest

PRINCESS You must take care what you say for your own sake, Minnie

DUCHESS I know quite enough about her to make her position in London impossible I'm going to ruin her

PRINCESS What about Tony?

DUCHESS Oh, I've finished with him Ah! I'm not the kind of woman to stand that sort of treatment I hope he'll end in the gutter

PRINCESS Don't you care for him any more?

DUCHESS My dear, if he was starving, and went down on his bended knees to me for a piece of bread, I wouldn't give it to him He revolts me

PRINCESS Well, I'm very glad It distressed me to see you on those terms with a boy like that You're well rid of him

DUCHESS My dear, you needn't tell me that He's a thorough wrong 'un, and that's all there is about it He hasn't even had the decency to try and excuse himself He hasn't even made an attempt to see me

PRINCESS [*Gives her a quick look*] After all, he never really cared for you Anyone could see that

DUCHESS [*Her voice breaking*] Oh, don't say that, Flora I couldn't bear it He loved me Until that woman came between us I know he loved me He couldn't help loving me I did everything in the world for him [*She bursts into tears*]

PRINCESS Minnie My dear, don't give way You know what a worthless creature he is Haven't you any self-respect?

DUCHESS He's the only man I've ever loved I could hardly bear him out of my sight What shall I do without him?

PRINCESS Take care, here he is

[*TONY comes in He is startled at seeing the DUCHESS. She turns away and hurriedly dries her tears.*]

TONY Oh, I beg your pardon I didn't know anyone was here I was looking for some cigarettes

[He stands there awkwardly, not knowing whether to go or stay The PRINCESS looks at him reflectively There is a moment's silence Then she shrugs her shoulders and goes out He looks at the DUCHESSE who stands with her back to him He hesitates a moment, then, almost on the tips of his toes, walks over to the cigarettes, fills his case, takes another look at the DUCHESSE, and is in the act of tip-toeing out of the room when she stops him with her question]

DUCHESSE Where are you going?

TONY Nowhere in particular

DUCHESSE Then you'd better stay here

TONY I thought you wished to be alone

DUCHESSE Is that why you've kept away from me all day?

[He sinks sulkily into an armchair The DUCHESSE finally turns round and faces him]

DUCHESSE Haven't you got anything to say for yourself at all?

TONY What's the good of talking?

DUCHESSE You might at least say you're sorry for the pain you've caused me If you'd had any affection for me you wouldn't have done all you could to avoid me

TONY I knew you'd only make a scene

DUCHESSE Good heavens, you surely don't expect me not to make a scene

TONY The whole thing's very unfortunate

DUCHESSE Ha! Unfortunate You break my heart and then you say it's unfortunate

TONY I didn't mean that I meant it was unfortunate that you caught us out

DUCHESSÉ Oh, hold your stupid tongue Every word you say is more unfortunate than the last

TONY It's because I knew you'd take offence at everything I said that I thought the best thing I could do was to keep out of the way

DUCHESSÉ You're heartless, heartless If you'd had any decent feeling you couldn't have eaten the lunch you did But you munched away, munched, munched, munched, till I could have killed you

TONY Well, I was hungry

DUCHESSÉ You oughtn't to have been hungry.

TONY What are you going to do about it?

DUCHESSÉ About your appetite? Pray to God your next mouthful chokes you

TONY No, about the other

DUCHESSÉ I'm going to leave this house this afternoon

TONY D'you want me to come, too?

DUCHESSÉ What d'you suppose it matters to me whether you go or stay?

TONY If you go I shall have to go, too

DUCHESSÉ You ought to start soon then It's four miles to the station I shall be obliged if you will not get in the same carriage as me

TONY I'm not going to walk They can run me down in a car

DUCHESSÉ There's nothing but a luggage cart, and I'm going in that

TONY Isn't there room for me?

DUCHESSÉ No

TONY When d'you want me to move out of my flat?

DUCHESSÉ What has that got to do with me?

TONY You know very well that I can't pay the rent

DUCHESSÉ That's your look-out

TONY I shall go to the colonies

DUCHESSÉ That's the very best thing you can do I hope
you'll have to break stones, and dig, and paint—with
lead paint I hope you're miserable

TONY Oh, well, it'll have its compensations

DUCHESSÉ Such as?

TONY I shall be my own master I was about fed up with
this, I can tell you

DUCHESSÉ Yes, you can say that now

TONY D'you think it was all jam, never being able to call
my soul my own? I was sick to death of it

DUCHESSÉ You cad!

TONY Well, you may just as well know the truth

DUCHESSÉ D'you mean to say you never cared for me? Not
even at the beginning?

*[He shrugs his shoulders, but does not answer She speaks
the next phrases in little gasps gradually weakening as
her emotion overcomes her He stands before her in
sulky silence]*

DUCHESSÉ Tony, I've done everything in the world for you
I've been like a mother to you How *can* you be so
ungrateful You haven't got any heart If you had you'd
have asked me to forgive you You'd have made
some attempt to . . . Don't you *want* me to forgive
you?

TONY What d'you mean by that?

DUCHESSÉ If you'd only asked me, if you'd only shown you
were sorry, I'd have been angry with you, I wouldn't
have spoken to you for a week, but I'd have forgiven
you—I'd have forgiven you, Tony But you never gave
me a chance It's cruel of you, cruel

TONY Well, anyhow, it's too late now

DUCHESSÉ Do you want it to be too late?

TONY It's no good grouching about the past The thing's over now

DUCHESSÉ Aren't you sorry?

TONY I don't know I suppose I am in a way I don't want to make you unhappy

DUCHESSÉ If you wanted to be unfaithful to me, why didn't you prevent me from finding out? You didn't even trouble to take a little precaution

TONY I was a damned fool, I know that

DUCHESSÉ Are you in love with that woman?

TONY No

DUCHESSÉ Then why did you? Oh, Tony, how could you?

TONY If one felt about things at night as one does next morning, life would be a dashed sight easier

DUCHESSÉ If I said to you, Let's let bygones be bygones and start afresh, what would you say, Tony?

[She looks away He rests his eyes on her reflectively]

TONY We've made a break now We'd better leave it at that I shall go out to the colonies

DUCHESSÉ Tony, you don't mean that seriously You could never stand it You know, you're not strong You'll only die

TONY Oh, well, one can only die once.

DUCHESSÉ I'm sorry for all I said just now, Tony I didn't mean it

TONY It doesn't matter

DUCHESSÉ I can't live without you, Tony

TONY I've made up my mind It's no good talking

DUCHESSÉ I'm sorry I was horrid to you, Tony I'll never be again Won't you forget it? Oh, Tony, won't you forgive me? I'll do anything in the world for you if only you won't leave me

TONY It's a rotten position I'm in I must think of the future

DUCHESSE Oh, but Tony, I'll make it all right for you

TONY It's very kind of you, but it's not good enough Let's part good friends, Minnie If I've got to walk to the station, it's about time I was starting [*He holds out his hand to her*]

DUCHESSE D'you mean to say it's good-bye? Good-bye for ever? Oh, how can you be so cruel!

TONY When one's made up one's mind to do a thing, it's best to do it at once

DUCHESSE Oh, I can't bear it I can't bear it [*She begins to cry*] Oh, what a fool I was! I ought to have pretended not to see anything I wish I'd never known Then you wouldn't have thought of leaving me

TONY Come, my dear, pull yourself together You'll get over it

DUCHESSE [*Desperately*] Tony, if you want to marry me—I'm willing to marry you [*A pause*]

TONY I should be just as dependent on you D'you think it would be jolly for me having to come to you for every five pounds I wanted?

DUCHESSE I'll settle something on you so that you'll be independent A thousand a year Will that do?

TONY You are a good sort, Minnie [*He goes over and sits down beside her*]

DUCHESSE You will be kind to me, won't you?

TONY Rather! And look here, you needn't give me that two-seater I shall be able to drive the Rolls-Royce

DUCHESSE You didn't want to go to the colonies, did you?

TONY Not much

DUCHESSE Oh, Tony, I do love you so

TONY That's right

DUCHESS We won't stay another minute in this house
Ring the bell, will you? You'll come with me in the
luggage cart?

TONY [*Touching the bell*] I much prefer that to walking

DUCHESS It's monstrous that there shouldn't be a motor to
take luggage to the station It's a most uncomfortable
house to stay in

TONY Oh, beastly D'you know that I didn't have a bath-
room attached to my bedroom? [*POLE comes in*]

DUCHESS Is the luggage cart ready, Pole?

POLE I'll enquire, your grace

DUCHESS My maid is to follow in the morning with the
luggage Mr Paxton will come with me [*To TONY*]
What about your things?

TONY Oh, they'll be all right I brought my man with me

POLE Her ladyship is just coming downstairs, your grace

DUCHESS Oh, is she? Thank you, that'll do, Pole

POLE Very good, your grace

[*He goes out As soon as he closes the door behind him the
DUCHESS springs to her feet*]

DUCHESS I won't see her Tony, see if Thornton is on the
terrace

TONY All right [*He goes to the French window*] Yes I'll call
him, shall I? Clay, come here a minute, will you?

[*He goes out THORNTON CLAY comes in, followed
immediately by the PRINCESS and FLEMING*]

DUCHESS Thornton, I'm told Pearl is coming downstairs

CLAY At last

DUCHESS I won't see her Nothing will induce me to see
her

PRINCESS My dear, what is to be done? We can't make her
remain upstairs in her own house

DUCHESSE No, but Thornton can speak to her She's evidently ashamed of herself I only ask one thing, that she should keep out of the way till I'm gone

CLAY I'll do my best

DUCHESSE I'm going to walk up and down till the luggage cart is ready I haven't taken my exercise to-day

[She goes out]

CLAY If Pearl is in a temper that's not a very pleasant message to give her

PRINCESS You won't find her in a temper If she's dreadfully upset, tell her what Minnie says gently

FLEMING Here is Bessie *[She comes in]* It appears that Pearl is just coming downstairs

BESSIE Is she?

PRINCESS Have you seen her this morning, Bessie?

BESSIE No She sent her maid to ask me to go to her, but I had a headache and couldn't

[They look at her curiously She is inclined to be abrupt and silent It may be imagined that she has made up her mind to some course, but what that is the others cannot tell FLEMING goes over and sits beside her]

FLEMING I'm thinking of going back to America next Saturday, Bessie

BESSIE Dear Fleming, I shall be sorry to lose you

FLEMING I expect you'll be too busy to think about me You'll have to see all kinds of people, and then there's your trousseau to get

BESSIE I wish you could come over to Paris with me, Princess, and help me with it

PRINCESS IP *[She gets an inkling of what BESSIE means]* Of course, if I could be of any help to you, dear child

[She takes BESSIE's hand and gives her a fond smile BESSIE

turns away to hide a tear that for a moment obscures her eyes]
Perhaps it's a very good idea We must talk about it

*PEARL comes in She is perfectly cool and collected
radiant in a wonderful, audacious gown, she is looking
her best and knows it There is nothing in her manner to
indicate the smallest recollection of the episode that took
place on the preceding evening*

PEARL [*Brightly*] Good-morning

CLAY Good-afternoon

PEARL I knew everyone would abuse me for coming down
so late It was such a lovely day I thought it was a pity to
get up

CLAY Don't be paradoxical, Pearl, it's too hot

PEARL The sun streamed into my room, and I said, It's a sin
not to get up on a morning like this And the more I said
I ought to get up, the more delightful I found it to lie in
bed How is your head, Bessie?

BESSIE Oh, it's better, thank you

PEARL I was sorry to hear you weren't feeling up to the
mark

BESSIE I didn't sleep very well

PEARL What have you done with your young man?

BESSIE Harry? He's writing letters

PEARL Spreading the glad tidings, I suppose You ought
to write to his mother, Bessie It would be a graceful
attention A charming, frank little letter, the sort of
thing one would expect an *ingenue* to write Straight
from the heart

CLAY I'm sure you'd love to write it yourself, Pearl.

PEARL And we must think about sending an announcement
to the Morning Post

FLEMING You think of everything, Pearl

PEARL I take my duties as Bessie's chaperon very seriously

I've already got a brilliant idea for the gown I'm going to wear at the wedding

FLEMING Geel

PEARL My dear Fleming, don't say Gee, it's so American.
Say By Jove

FLEMING I couldn't without laughing

PEARL Laffing Why can't you say laughing?

FLEMING I don't want to

PEARL How obstinate you are Of course, now that Bessie is going to marry an Englishman she'll have to take lessons I know an excellent woman She's taught all the American peeresses

FLEMING You surprise me

PEARL She's got a wonderful method She makes you read aloud And she has long lists of words that you have to repeat twenty times a day—half instead of haf, and barth instead of bath, and carnt instead of can't

FLEMING By Jove instead of Gee?

PEARL Peeresses don't say By Jove, Fleming She teaches them to say Good heavens instead of Mercy

FLEMING Does she make money by it?

PEARL Pots She's a lovely woman Eleo Dorset had an accent that you could cut with a knife when she first came over, and in three months she hadn't got any more than I have

BESSIE [*Getting up To FLEMING*] D'you think it's too hot for a turn in the garden?

FLEMING Why, no

BESSIE Shall we go then? [*They go out together*]

PEARL What's the matter with Bessie? She must have swallowed a poker last night No wonder she couldn't sleep It's enough to give anyone indigestion

CLAY You know that Minnie is going this afternoon, Pearl?

PEARL Yes, so I heard It's such a bore there are no cars to take her to the station She'll have to go in the luggage cart

CLAY She doesn't wish to see you

PEARL Oh, but I wish to see her

CLAY I daresay

PEARL I must see her

CLAY She asked me to tell you that she only wished you to do one thing, and that is to keep out of the way till she's gone

PEARL Then you can go and tell her that unless she sees me she shan't have the luggage cart

CLAY Pearl!

PEARL That's my ultimatum.

CLAY Can you see me taking a message like that to the Duchesse?

PEARL It's four miles to the station, and there's not a scrap of shade all the way

CLAY After all, it's not a very unreasonable request she's making

PEARL If she wants the luggage cart she must come and say good-bye to me like a lady

CLAY [*To the PRINCESS*] What am I to do? We used up all the sal volatile last night

PRINCESS I'll tell her if you like D'you really insist on seeing her, Pearl?

PEARL Yes, it's very important [*The PRINCESS goes out*
PEARL *watches her go with a smile*] I'm afraid Flora is shocked She shouldn't know such people

CLAY Really, Pearl, your behaviour is monstrous

PEARL Never mind about my behaviour Tell me how luncheon went off.

CLAY My dear, it was like a gathering of relations who hate one another, after the funeral of a rich aunt who's left all her money to charity

PEARL It must have been priceless I'd have given anything to be there

CLAY Why weren't you?

PEARL Oh, I knew there'd be scenes, and I'm never at my best in a scene before luncheon One of the things I've learnt from the war is that a general should choose his own time for a battle

CLAY Minnie moved heaven and earth to get away this morning

PEARL I knew she couldn't I knew none of them could go till the afternoon

CLAY The train service is atrocious

PEARL George says that is one of the advantages of the place It keeps it rural There's one at nine and another at half-past four I knew that not even the most violent disturbances would get people up at eight who never by any chance have breakfast till ten As soon as I awoke I took the necessary steps

CLAY [*Interrupting*] You slept?

PEARL Oh yes, I slept beautifully There's nothing like a little excitement to give me a good night

CLAY Well, you certainly had some excitement I've rarely witnessed such a terrific scene

PEARL I sent out to the garage and gave instructions that the old Rolls-Royce was to be taken down at once and the other was to go to London

CLAY What for?

PEARL Never mind You'll know presently Then I did a little telephoning

CLAY Why were you so anxious to prevent anybody from leaving the house?

PEARL I couldn't have persuaded myself that my party was a success if half my guests had left me on Sunday morning I thought they might change their minds by the afternoon

CLAY If that's your only reason, I don't think it's a very good one

PEARL It isn't I will be frank with you, Thornton I can imagine that a very amusing story might be made out of this episode I never mind scandal, but I don't expose myself to ridicule if I can help it

CLAY My dear Pearl, surely you can trust the discretion of your guests Who do you think will give it away?

PEARL You

CLAY I? My dear Pearl, I give you my word of honour

PEARL [*Calmly*] My dear Thornton, I don't care two-pence about your word of honour You're a professional entertainer, and you'll sacrifice everything to a good story Why, don't you remember that killing story about your father's death? You dined out a whole season on it

CLAY Well, it was a perfectly killing story No one would have enjoyed it more than my poor old father

PEARL I'm not going to risk anything, Thornton I think it's much better there should be no story to tell

CLAY No one can move the clock backwards, Pearl I couldn't help thinking at luncheon that there were the elements of a very good story indeed.

PEARL And you'll tell it, Thornton. Then I shall say My dear, does it sound probable? They all stayed quite happily till Monday morning, Sturrey and the Arlingtons dined on the Sunday night, and we had a very merry evening Besides, I was lunching with Minnie only two days afterwards And I shall say Poor Thornton, he is such a liar, isn't he?

CLAY I confess that if you are reconciled with Minnie it will take a great deal of the point away from my story
What about Arthur Fenwick?

PEARL He's a sensualist, and the sensual are always sentimental

CLAY He scared me dreadfully at luncheon He was eating a dressed crab, and his face grew every minute more purple I was expecting him to have an apoplectic fit

PEARL It's not an unpleasant death, you know, Thornton, to have a stroke while you're eating your favourite dish

CLAY You know, there are no excuses for you, Pearl

PEARL Human nature excuses so much, Thornton

CLAY You really might have left Tony alone This habit you have of snitching has got you into trouble before

PEARL People are so selfish It just happens that I find no man so desirable as one that a friend of mine is in love with I make allowances for the idiosyncrasies of my friends Why shouldn't they make allowances for mine?

[The DUCHESS comes in, erect and haughty, with the air of Boadicea facing the Roman legions PEARL turns to her with an ingratiating smile]

PEARL Ah, Minnie

DUCHESS I'm told the only way I can leave this house is by submitting to the odious necessity of seeing you

PEARL I wish you wouldn't go, Minnie Lord Sturrey is coming over to dinner to-night, and so are the Arlingtons I always take a lot of trouble to get the right people together, and I hate it when anybody fails me at the last minute

DUCHESS D'you think anything would have induced me to stay so long if there'd been any possibility of getting away?

PEARL It wouldn't have been nice to go without saying good-bye to me

DUCHESS Don't talk nonsense, Pearl

PEARL D'you know that you behaved very badly last night, and I ought to be extremely angry with you?

DUCHESS I? Thornton, the woman's as mad as a hatter

PEARL You really oughtn't to have made a scene before Harry Bleane And, you know, to tell Arthur wasn't playing the game If you wanted to tell anyone, why didn't you tell George?

DUCHESS In the first place, he wasn't here He never is

PEARL I know He says that now society has taken to coming down to the country for week-ends he prefers London

DUCHESS I'll never forgive you Never Never Never You'd got Arthur Fenwick Why weren't you satisfied with him? If you wanted to have an affair with anyone, why didn't you take Thornton? He's almost the only one of your friends with whom you haven't The omission is becoming almost marked

PEARL Thornton never makes love to me except when other people are looking He can be very passionate in the front seat of my box at the opera

CLAY This conversation is growing excessively personal
I'll leave you *[He goes out]*

PEARL I'm sorry I had to insist on your seeing me, but I had something quite important to say to you

DUCHESS Before you go any further, Pearl, I wish to tell you that I'm going to marry Tony

PEARL *[Aghast]* Minnie! Oh, my dear, you're not doing it to spite me? You know, honestly, he doesn't interest me in the slightest Oh, Minnie, do think carefully.

DUCHESS It's the only way I can keep him.

PEARL D'you think you'll be happy?

DUCHESS What should you care if I'm happy?

PEARL Of course I care D'you think it's wise? You're giving yourself into his hands Oh, my dear, how can you risk it?

DUCHESS He said he was going out to the colonies I love him I believe you're really distressed How strange you are, Pearl! Perhaps it's the best thing for me He may settle down I was very lonely sometimes, you know Sometimes, when I had the blues, I almost wished I'd never left home

PEARL And I've been moving heaven and earth to get him a job I've been on the telephone this morning to all the Cabinet Ministers I know, and at last I've done it That's what I wanted to tell you I thought you'd be so pleased I suppose now he won't want it

DUCHESS Oh, I'm sure he will He's very proud, you know That's one of the things I liked in him He had to be dependent on me, and that's partly why he always wanted to marry me

PEARL Of course, you'll keep your title

DUCHESS Oh yes, I shall do that

PEARL [*Going towards her as if to kiss her*] Well, darling, you have my very, very best wishes

DUCHESS [*Drawing back*] I'm not going to forgive you, Pearl

PEARL But you've forgiven Tony

DUCHESS I don't blame him He was led away

PEARL Come, Minnie, don't be spiteful You might let by-gones be by-gones

DUCHESS Nothing will induce me to stay in this house another night

PEARL It's a very slow train, and you'll have to go without your tea.

DUCHESS I don't care

PEARL You won't arrive in London till half-past eight, and you'll have to dine in a restaurant

DUCHESS I don't care

PEARL You'll be grubby and hot Tony will be hungry and out of temper And you'll look your age

DUCHESS You promised me the luggage cart

PEARL [*With a sigh*] You shall have it, but you'll have to sit on the floor, because it hasn't got any seats

DUCHESS Pearl, it's not going to break down on the way to the station?

PEARL Oh, no How can you suspect me of playing a trick like that on you? [*With a tinge of regret*] It never occurred to me

[*THORNTON CLAY comes in*]

CLAY Pearl, I thought you'd like to know that Fenwick is coming to say good-bye to you

DUCHESS I'll go and tell Tony about the job you've got him By the way, what is it?

PEARL Oh, it's something in the Education Office

DUCHESS How very nice What do they do there?

PEARL Nothing But it'll keep him busy from ten to four
[*The DUCHESS goes out*]

PEARL She's going to marry him

CLAY I know

PEARL I'm a wonderful matchmaker First Bessie and Harry Bleane, and now Minnie and Tony Paxton I shall have to find someone for you, Thornton

CLAY How on earth did you manage to appease her?

PEARL I reasoned with her After all, she should be glad the boy has sown his wild oats before he marries And besides, if he were her husband, of course she wouldn't

expect fidelity from him, it seems unnatural to expect it when he isn't

CLAY But she's going all the same

PEARL I've got a quarter of an hour yet Give me your handkerchief, will you?

CLAY [*Handing it to her*] You're not going to burst into tears?

PEARL [*She rubs her cheeks violently*] I thought I ought to look a little wan and pale when Arthur comes in

CLAY You'll never love me, Pearl You tell me all your secrets

PEARL Shall I tell you what to do about it? Take the advice I give to Americans who come over to London and want to see the Tower say you've been, and don't go

CLAY D'you think you can bring Arthur round?

PEARL I'm sure I could if he loved me

CLAY My dear, he dotes on you

PEARL Don't be a fool, Thornton He loves his love for me That's quite a different thing I've only got one chance He sees himself as the man of iron. I'm going to play the dear little thing racket

CLAY You're a most unscrupulous woman, Pearl

PEARL Not more than most Please go I think he ought to find me alone

[CLAY goes out PEARL seats herself in a pensive attitude and looks down at the carpet, in her hand she holds dejectedly an open volume of poetry Presently ARTHUR FENWICK comes in She pretends not to see him He is the strong man, battered but not beaten, struggling with the emotion which he tries to master]

FENWICK Pearl!

PEARL [*With a jump*] Oh, how you startled me I didn't hear you come in

FENWICK I daresay you're surprised to see me I thought it was necessary that we should have a short conversation before I left this house

PEARL [*Looking away*] I'm glad to see you once more

FENWICK You understand that everything is over between us

PEARL If you've made up your mind, there's nothing for me to say I know that nothing can move you when you've once done that

FENWICK [*Drawing himself up a little*] No That has always been part of my power

PEARL I wouldn't have you otherwise

FENWICK I don't want to part from you in anger, Pearl Last night I could have thrashed you within an inch of your life

PEARL Why didn't you? D'you think I'd have minded that from the man I loved?

FENWICK You know I could never hit a woman

PEARL I thought of you all through the long hours of the night, Arthur

FENWICK I never slept a wink

PEARL One would never think it You must be made of iron

FENWICK I think I am sometimes

PEARL Am I very pale?

FENWICK A little

PEARL I feel a perfect wreck

FENWICK You must go and lie down It's no good making yourself ill

PEARL Oh, don't bother about me, Arthur

FENWICK I've bothered about you so long. It's difficult for me to get out of the habit all at once

PEARL Every word you say stabs me to the heart.

FENWICK I'll get done quickly with what I had to tell you
and then go It's merely this Of course, I shall continue
the allowance I've always made you

PEARL Oh, I couldn't take it I couldn't take it

FENWICK You must be reasonable, Pearl This is a matter
of business

PEARL It's a question I refuse to discuss Nothing would
have induced me to accept your help if I hadn't loved
you Now that there can be nothing more between us—
no, no, the thought outrages me

FENWICK I was afraid that you'd take up that attitude
Remember that you've only got eight thousand a year of
your own You can't live on that

PEARL I can starve

FENWICK I must insist, Pearl, for my own sake You've
adopted a style of living which you would never have
done if you hadn't had me at the back of you I'm
morally responsible, and I must meet my obligations

PEARL We can only be friends in future, Arthur

FENWICK I haven't often asked you to do anything for me,
Pearl

PEARL I shall return your presents Let me give you my
pearl necklace at once

FENWICK Girlie, you wouldn't do that

PEARL [*Pretending to try and take the necklace off*] I can't
undo the clasp Please help me

[*She goes up to him and turns her back so that he may get
at it*]

FENWICK I won't I won't.

PEARL I'll tear it off my neck

FENWICK Pearl, you break my heart Do you care for me so
little that you can't bear to wear the trifling presents I
gave you

PEARL If you talk to me like that I shall cry Don't you see that I'm trying to keep my self-control?

FENWICK This is dreadful This is even more painful than I anticipated

PEARL You see, strength is easy to you I'm weak That's why I put myself in your hands I felt your power instinctively

FENWICK I know, I know, and it was because I felt you needed me that I loved you I wanted to shelter you from the storms and buffets of the world

PEARL Why didn't you save me from myself, Arthur?

FENWICK When I look at your poor, pale little face I wonder what you'll do without me, girlie

PEARL [*Her voice breaking*] It'll be very hard I've grown so used to depending on you Whenever anything has gone wrong, I've come to you and you've put it right I was beginning to think there was nothing you couldn't do

FENWICK I've always welcomed obstacles I like something to surmount It excites me

PEARL You seemed to take all my strength from me I felt strangely weak beside you

FENWICK It wasn't necessary that we should both be strong I loved you because you were weak I liked you to come to me in all your troubles It made me feel so good to be able to put everything right for you

PEARL You've always been able to do the impossible

FENWICK [*Impressively*] I have never found anything impossible

PEARL [*Deeply moved*] Except to forgive

FENWICK Ah, I see you know me I never forget I never forgive

PEARL I suppose that's why people feel there's something strangely Napoleonic about you

FENWICK Maybe And yet—though you're only a woman, you've broken me, Pearl, you've broken me

PEARL Oh no, don't say that I couldn't bear that I want you to go on being strong and ruthless

FENWICK Something has gone out of my life for ever I almost think you've broken my heart I was so proud of you I took so much pleasure in your success Why, whenever I saw your name in the society columns of the papers it used to give me a thrill of satisfaction What's going to become of you now, girlie? What's going to become of you now?

PEARL I don't know, I don't care

FENWICK This fellow, does he care for you? Will he make you happy?

PEARL Tony? He's going to marry the Duchesse [FENWICK *represses a start*] I shall never see him again

FENWICK Then if I leave you, you'll have nobody but your husband.

PEARL Nobody

FENWICK You'll be terribly lonely, girlie

PEARL You will think of me sometimes, Arthur, won't you?

FENWICK I shall never forget you, girlie I shall never forget how you used to leave your fine house in Mayfair and come and lunch with me down town

PEARL You used to give me such delicious things to eat

FENWICK It was a treat to see you in your beautiful clothes sharing a steak with me and a bottle of beer I can order a steak, Pearl, can't I?

PEARL And d'you remember those delicious little onions that we used to have? [*She seems to taste them*] M

M It makes my mouth water to think of them

FENWICK There are few women who enjoy food as much as you do, Pearl

PEARL D'you know, next time you dined with me, I'd made up my mind to give you an entirely English dinner
Scotch broth, herrings, mixed grill, saddle of lamb, and then enormous marrow bones

[FENWICK *can hardly bear the thought, his face grows red, his eyes bulge, and he gasps*

FENWICK Oh, girlie! [*With utter abandonment*] Let's have that dinner [*He seizes her in his arms and kisses her*] I can't leave you You need me too much

PEARL Arthur, Arthur, can you forgive me?

FENWICK To err is human, to forgive divine

PEARL Oh, how like you that is!

FENWICK If you must deceive me, don't let me ever find out I love you too much

PEARL I won't, Arthur, I promise you I won't

FENWICK Come and sit on the sofa and let me look at you
I seem to see you for the first time

PEARL You know, you wouldn't have liked the walk to the station It's four miles in the sun You're a vain old thing, and your boots are always a little too small for you

[BESSIE *comes in She stops as she sees PEARL and FENWICK sitting hand in hand*

PEARL Are you going out, Bessie?

BESSIE As soon as Harry has finished his letters, we're going for a walk

PEARL [*To FENWICK*] You mustn't squeeze my hand in Bessie's presence, Arthur

FENWICK You're a very lucky girl, Bessie, to have a sister like Pearl She's the most wonderful woman in the world

PEARL You're talking nonsense, Arthur Go and put some flannels on It makes me quite hot to look at you in that suit We'll try and get up a little tennis after tea

FENWICK Now, you mustn't tire yourself, Pearl Remember those white cheeks of yours

PEARL [*With a charming look at him*] Oh, I shall soon get my colour back now

[She gives him her hand to kiss and he goes out PEARL takes a little mirror out of her bag and looks at herself reflectively]

PEARL Men are very trivial, foolish creatures They have kind hearts But their heads Oh dear, oh dear, it's lamentable And they're so vain, poor dears, they're so vain

BESSIE Pearl, to-morrow, when we go back to London, I'm going away

PEARL Are you? Where?

BESSIE The Princess is going to take me over to Paris for a few days

PEARL Oh, is that all? Don't stay away too long You ought to be in London just at present

BESSIE On my return I'm proposing to stay with the Princess

PEARL [*Calmly*] Nonsense

BESSIE I wasn't asking your permission, Pearl I was telling you my plans

PEARL [*Looks at her for a moment reflectively*] Are you going to make me a scene, too? I've already gone through two this afternoon I'm rather tired of them

BESSIE Please don't be alarmed I've got nothing more to say

[She makes as though to leave the room]

PEARL Don't be a little fool, Bessie You've been staying with me all the season I can't allow you to leave my

house and go and live with Flora We don't want to go out of our way to make people gossip

BESSIE Please don't argue with me, Pearl It's not my business to reproach you for anything you do But it isn't my business, either, to stand by and watch

PEARL You're no longer a child, Bessie

BESSIE I've been blind and foolish Because I was happy and having a good time, I never stopped to ask for explanations of this, that and the other I never thought

The life was so gay and brilliant—it never struck me that underneath it all—— Oh, Pearl, don't make me say what I have in my heart, but let me go quietly

PEARL Bessie, dear, you must be reasonable Think what people would say if you suddenly left my house They'd ask all sorts of questions, and heaven knows what explanations they'd invent People aren't charitable, you know I don't want to be hard on you, but I can't afford to let you do a thing like that

BESSIE Now that I know what I do, I should never respect myself again if I stayed

PEARL I don't know how you can be so unkind

BESSIE I don't want to be that, Pearl But it's stronger than I am I must go

PEARL [*With emotion*] I'm so fond of you, Bessie You don't know how much I want you with me After all, I've seen so little of you these last few years It's been such a comfort to me to have you You were so pretty and young and sweet, it was like a ray of April sunshine in the house

BESSIE I'm afraid you think women are as trivial, foolish creatures as men, Pearl

[PEARL looks up and sees that BESSIE is not in the least taken in by the pathetic attitude]

PEARL [*Isily*] Take care you don't go too far, Bessie.

BESSIE There's no need for us to quarrel I've made up my mind, and there's the end of it

PEARL Flora's a fool I shall tell her that I won't have her take you away from me You'll stay with me until you're married

BESSIE D'you want me to tell you that I can hardly bear to speak to you? You fill me with shame and disgust I want never to see you again

PEARL Really, you drive me beyond endurance I think I must be the most patient woman in the world to put up with all I've had to put up with to-day After all, what have I done? I was a little silly and incautious By the fuss you all make one would think no one had ever been incautious and silly before Besides, it hasn't got anything to do with you Why don't you mind your own business?

BESSIE [*Bitterly*] You talk as though your relations with Arthur Fenwick were perfectly natural.

PEARL Good heavens, you're not going to pretend you didn't know about Arthur After all, I'm no worse than anybody else Why, one of the reasons we Americans like London is that we can live our own lives and people accept things philosophically Eleo Gloster, Sadie Twickenham, Maimie Hartlepool—you don't imagine they're faithful to their husbands? They didn't marry them for that

BESSIE Oh, Pearl, how can you? How can you? Haven't you any sense of decency at all? When I came in just now and saw you sitting on the sofa with that gross, vulgar, sensual old man—oh! [*She makes a gesture of disgust*] You can't love him I could have understood if . . . but—oh, it's so disgraceful, it's so hideous What can you see in him? He's nothing but rich . . . [*She pauses, and her face changes as a thought comes to her, and coming horrifies her*] It's not because he's rich? Pearl! Oh!

PEARL Really, Bessie, you're very silly, and I'm tired of talking to you

BESSIE Pearl, it's not that! Answer me Answer me

PEARL [*Roughly*] Mind your own business

BESSIE He was right, then, last night, when he called you that He was so right that you didn't even notice it
A few hours later you're sitting hand in hand with him
A slut That's what he called you A slut A slut

PEARL How dare you! Hold your tongue How dare you!

BESSIE A kept woman That's what you are

PEARL [*Recovering herself*] I'm a fool to lose my temper with you

BESSIE Why should you? I'm saying nothing but the truth

PEARL You're a silly little person, Bessie If Arthur helps me a little, that's his affair, and mine He's got more money than he knows what to do with, and it amuses him to see me spend it I could have twenty thousand a year from him if I chose

BESSIE Haven't you got money of your own?

PEARL You know exactly what I've got Eight thousand a year D'you think I could have got the position I have on that? You're not under the impression all the world comes to my house because of my charm, are you? I'm not You don't think the English want us here? You don't think they like us marrying their men? Good heavens, when you've known England as long as I have you'll realise that in their hearts they still look upon us as savages and Red Indians We have to force ourselves upon them They come to me because I amuse them Very early in my career I discovered that the English can never resist getting something for nothing If a dancer is the rage, they'll see her at my house If a fiddler is in vogue, they'll hear him at my concert.

I give them balls I give them dinners I've made myself the fashion, I've got power, I've got influence But everything I've got—my success, my reputation, my notoriety—I've bought it, bought it, bought it

BESSIE How humiliating!

PEARL And, finally, I've bought you a husband

BESSIE That's not true He loves me

PEARL D'you think he'd have loved you if I hadn't shown you to him in these surroundings, if I hadn't dazzled him by the brilliant people among whom he found you You don't know what love is made of D'you think it's nothing that he should hear a Prime Minister pay you compliments Of course I bought him

BESSIE [*Aghast*] It's horrible

PEARL You know the truth now It'll be very useful to you in your married life Run away and take your little walk with Harry Bleane I'm going to arrange my face

[*She goes out* BESSIE *is left ashamed and stunned*
BLEANE *comes in*

BLEANE I'm afraid I've kept you waiting I'm so sorry

BESSIE [*Dully*] It doesn't matter at all

BLEANE Where shall we go? You know the way about these parts, and I don't

BESSIE Harry, I want you to release me I can't marry you

BLEANE [*Aghast*] Why?

BESSIE I want to go back to America I'm frightened.

BLEANE Of me?

BESSIE Oh no, I know that you're a dear, good creature, I'm frightened of what I may become

BLEANE But I love you, Bessie

BESSIE Then that's all the more reason for me to go I must tell you frankly I'm not in love with you, I only

like you I would never have dreamt of marrying you, if you hadn't been who you are I wanted to have a title That's why Pearl married her husband, and that's why the Duchess married Let me go, Harry

BLEANE I knew you didn't love me, but I thought you might come to in time I thought if I tried I could make you love me

BESSIE You didn't know that I was nothing but a self-seeking, heartless snob

BLEANE I don't care what you say of yourself, I know that you can be nothing but what is true and charming

BESSIE After what you've seen last night? After what you know of this house? Aren't you disgusted with all of us?

BLEANE You can't think I could class you with the Duchesse and [He stops]

BESSIE Pearl at my age was no different from what I am It's the life

BLEANE But perhaps you won't want to lead it The set you've been living in here isn't the only set in England It makes a stir because it's in the public eye Its doings are announced in the papers But it isn't a very good set, and there are plenty of people who don't very much admire it

BESSIE You must let me try and say what I have in my heart And be patient with me You think I can make myself at home in your life I've had a hint of it now and then I've seen a glimpse of it through Pearl's laughter and the Duchesse's sneers It's a life of dignity, of responsibilities, and of public duty

BLEANE [With a rueful smile] You make it very strenuous

BESSIE It comes naturally to the English girls of your class They've known it all their lives, and they've been brought up to lead it But we haven't To us it's just tedious,

and its dignity is irksome We're bored, and we fall back on the only thing that offers, pleasure You've spoken to me about your house It means everything to you because it's associated with your childhood and all your people before you It could only mean something to me if I loved you And I don't

BLEANE You've made me so wretched I don't know what to say to you

BESSIE If I make you wretched now, it's so that we may both be saved a great deal of unhappiness later on I'm glad I don't care for you, for it would make it so much harder for me to go And I've got to go I can't marry you I want to go home If I marry ever I want to marry in my own country That is my place

BLEANE Don't you think you could wait a little before you decide finally?

BESSIE Don't put difficulties in my way Don't you see that we're not strong enough for the life over here? It goes to our head, we lose our bearings, we put away our own code, and we can't adopt the code of the country we come to We drift There's nothing for us to do but amuse ourselves, and we fall to pieces But in America we're safe And perhaps America wants us When we come over here we're like soldiers deserting our country in time of war Oh, I'm homesick for America I didn't know how much it meant to me till now Let me go back, Harry

BLEANE If you don't want to marry me, of course, I'm not going to try and make you

BESSIE Don't be angry, and be my friend always

BLEANE Always

BESSIE After all, three months ago you didn't know me In three months more you will have forgotten me Then marry some English girl, who can live your life and share your thoughts And be happy.

[PEARL comes in *She has rouged her cheeks, and has once more the healthy colour which is usual with her She is evidently jubilant*

PEARL The car has just come back from London [*She goes to the french window and calls*] Minnie!

BESSIE I shall tell Pearl to-morrow

BLEANE I won't post my letters then I'll go and get them out of the box

BESSIE Forgive me

[*He goes out The DUCHESS and CLAY appear at the window*

DUCHESS Did you call me?

PEARL The car has just come back from London, so it can take you to the station

DUCHESS That's a mercy I didn't at all like the idea of going to the station in the luggage cart Where is Flora? I must say good-bye to her

PEARL Oh, there's plenty of time now The car will run you down in ten minutes

[*TONY comes in, then the PRINCESS and FLEMING*

DUCHESS Tony, the car has returned, and is going to take us to the station

TONY Thank God for that! I should have looked a perfect fool in that luggage cart

CLAY But what on earth did you send the car to London for, anyway?

PEARL In one minute you'll see

[*ARTHUR FENWICK comes in He has changed into flannels*

FENWICK Who is that gentleman that's just arrived, Pearl?

PEARL The man of mystery

[*The BUTLER comes in, followed by ERNEST, and after announcing him goes out*

POLE Mr Ernest

DUCHESSE Ernest!

CLAY Ernest?

[He is a little dark man, with large eyes, and long hair neatly plastered down He is dressed like a tailor's dummy, in black coat, white gloves, silk hat, patent leather boots He is a dancing master, and overwhelmingly gentlemanly He speaks in mincing tones]

ERNEST Dear Lady Grayston

PEARL *[Shaking hands with him]* I'm so glad you were able to come *[To the others]* You were talking about Ernest last night, and I thought we would have nothing to do this evening and he would cheer and comfort us I sent the car up to London with orders to bring him back dead or alive

ERNEST My dear Lady Grayston, I'm sure I'll get into no end of trouble I had all sorts of calls to pay this afternoon, and I was dining out, and I'd promised to go to a little hop that the dear Duchess of Gloster was giving But I felt I couldn't refuse *you* You've always been such a good friend to me, dear Lady Grayston You must excuse me coming in my town clothes, but your chauffeur said there wasn't a moment to lose, so I came just as I am

PEARL But you look a perfect picture

ERNEST Oh, don't say that, dear Lady Grayston, I know this isn't the sort of thing one ought to wear in the country

PEARL You remember the Duchesse de Surennes?

ERNEST Oh, of course I remember the Duchesse

DUCHESSE Dear Ernest!

ERNEST Dear Duchessel

DUCHESSE I thought I was never going to see you again,
Ernest

ERNEST Oh, don't say that, it sounds too sad.

PEARL It's such a pity you must go, Minnie Ernest could have shown you all sorts of new steps

ERNEST Oh, dear Duchesse, you're not going the very moment I come down? That is unkind of you

DUCHESS [With an effort] I must go I must go

ERNEST Have you been practising that little step I showed you the other day? My dear friend, the Marchioness of Twickenham—not the *old* one, you know, the *new* one—is beginning to do it so well

DUCHESS [Struggling with herself] Have we time, Pearl? I should like Ernest to dance just one two-step with me

PEARL Of course there's time Thornton, set the gramophone

[THORNTON CLAY at once starts it, and the notes of the two-step tinkle out]

DUCHESS You don't mind, Ernest, do you?

ERNEST I love dancing with you, Duchesse

[They take up their positions]

DUCHESS Just one moment It always makes me so nervous to dance with you, Ernest

ERNEST Oh, now, don't be silly, dear Duchesse

[They begin to dance]

ERNEST Now hold your shoulders like a lady Arch your back, my dear, arch your back Don't look like a sack of potatoes If you put your foot there, I shall kick it

DUCHESS Oh, Ernest, don't be cross with me

ERNEST I shall be cross with you, Duchesse You don't pay any attention to what I say You must give your mind to it

DUCHESS I do! I do!

ERNEST And don't dance like an old fish-wife Put some vim into it That's what I always say about these modern dances you want two things, vim and nous

DUCHESS [Plaintively] Ernest!

ERNEST Now don't cry I'm saying all this for your good, you know What's wrong with you is that you've got no passion

DUCHESS Oh, Ernest, how can you say such a thing I've always looked upon myself as a very passionate woman.

ERNEST I don't know anything about that, dear Duchesse, but you don't get it into your dancing That's what I said the other day to the dear Marchioness of Twickenham—not the *new* one, you know, the *old* one—You must put passion into it, I said That's what these modern dances want—passion, passion

DUCHESS I see exactly what you mean, Ernest.

ERNEST And you must dance with your eyes as well, you know You must look as if you had a knife in your garter, and as if you'd kill me if I looked at another woman Don't you see how I'm looking, I'm looking as though I meant, Curse her! how I love her Therel

[*The music stops and they separate*]

DUCHESS I have improved, Ernest, haven't I?

ERNEST Yes, you've improved, dear Duchesse, but you want more practice

PEARL Minnie, why on earth don't you stay, and Ernest will give you a real lesson this evening

ERNEST That's what you want, Duchess

[*The DUCHESS wrestles with her soul*]

DUCHESS Tony, d'you think we can stop?

TONY I didn't want to go away It's rotten going up to town this evening What on earth are we going to do with ourselves when we get there?

DUCHESS Very well, Pearl, if it'll please you, we'll stop

PEARL That is nice of you, Minnie

DUCHESS You're very naughty sometimes, Pearl, but you
have a good heart, and I can't help being fond of you

PEARL [*With outstretched arms*] Minnie!

DUCHESS Pearl!

[*They clasp one another and affectionately embrace*]

ERNEST What an exquisite spectacle—two ladies of title
kissing one another

BESSIE [*To FLEMING*] They're not worth making a fuss
about I'm sailing for America next Saturday!

THE END

THE UNATTAINABLE

A FARCE

in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

CAROLINE ASHLEY

ISABELLA TRENCH

MAUDE FULTON

COOPER

ROBERT OLDHAM

REX CUNNINGHAM

DR CORNISH

The action takes place during the morning and afternoon of one day in the drawing-room of Caroline's house in Regent's Park.

THE UNATTAINABLE

THE FIRST ACT

SCENE *The drawing-room of CAROLINE's house in Regent's Park*
It is spacious and airy It is furnished in a pleasantly fantastic
manner by a woman who desires to be in the latest mode, but
who tempers it with her own good taste The influence of
futurism is apparent in the carpet, the cushions, the coverings
of sofas and chairs, but there is nothing so outrageous as to
make the room merely a curiosity Here and there large jars
of flowers contrast the sobriety of nature with the extravagance
of human imagination

It is early summer and late in the morning

COOPER, *a trim parlourmaid, ushers in* MRS TRENCH
ISABELLA TRENCH *is a woman of thirty-five, fair, plump,*
pretty still, well dressed and debonair She has an attractive
softness and a great gift of sympathy Her heart melts to
every unhappiness, and people in distress go to her in-
stinctively

COOPER I'll tell Mrs Ashley you're here, madam.

ISABELLA She's not down yet?

COOPER No, madam, she's only just had her bath

ISABELLA Do ask her if I can come up I want to see her
at once

COOPER Very good, madam

ISABELLA Tell her I'm frightfully excited.

COOPER Very good, madam.

ISABELLA [*With a smile*] Of course you know, Cooper?

COOPER Oh, yes, madam, it was cook saw it first She

always likes to have a look at The Times before it goes upstairs

ISABELLA Was Mrs Ashlev surprised

COOPER Well, madam, she never said a word She just kept staring at the announcement As I said to cook, I really thought her eyes would pop out of her head

ISABELLA I must see her at once, Cooper

COOPER I'll go and tell her, madam [*As she is going the telephone bell rings COOPER answers it*] Yes—who is it, please? No, miss, this is Mrs Ashley's maid speaking [*To ISABELLA*] It's Miss Fulton, madam

ISABELLA Oh, let me speak to her I think I know what she wants Go and tell Mrs Ashley I'm here.

COOPER Very good, madam

[*Exit ISABELLA sits down and takes the receiver*]

ISABELLA Maude, Maude! It's Isabella Trench speaking I rang you up this morning, and they said you hadn't come up from the country I have not seen Caroline yet I know no more than you do, darling I think it must be true. After all, it's in The Times Why don't you come round? I'm sure Caroline will want to see you Yes, that's it You'll find me here Good-bye

[*She puts down the receiver COOPER ushers in REX CUNNINGHAM He is a nice-looking young man with dark eyes, and dark hair brushed back over his head and plastered down He achieves a romantic look, notwithstanding his motor-coat and the cap that he carries in his hand*]

COOPER Mr Cunningham

[*REX hesitates a moment as he sees a stranger in the room, then recognizes ISABELLA and comes forward cordially ISABELLA greets him without warmth*]

REX How do you do?

COOPER Mrs Ashley will be down directly, madam.

ISABELLA Very well

[Exit COOPER]

REX [Looking at his wrist watch] She promised she'd be ready on the minute

ISABELLA What for?

REX I've got a new two-seater I'm going to take her for a turn round Richmond Park

ISABELLA When did you make that arrangement?

REX Last night

[She looks at him for a moment puzzled]

ISABELLA Haven't you heard the news?

REX What news?

ISABELLA Why, there's an announcement in The Times this morning of Stephen Ashley's death

REX My hat! Ought one to condole with Caroline or congratulate her?

ISABELLA I didn't know you called her Caroline

REX Didn't you?

ISABELLA She hasn't seen her husband for over ten years
One can hardly expect her to be very much upset Still,
I don't think she'll want to go for a run in your two-seater

REX Why not?

ISABELLA She'll have other things to do

REX Was her husband an awful brute?

ISABELLA I don't know anything about him Caroline never discusses her relations with him I don't believe there's one of her friends who's ever seen him even.

REX I asked her once if he was cruel to her She said no, he had adenoids

ISABELLA You seem to be on very intimate terms with Caroline

REX Do you disapprove?

ISABELLA Very much

REX What shall we do about it?

ISABELLA D'you know that Robert Oldham and Caroline have been madly in love with one another for the last ten years? It has given me a new faith in human nature to watch their charming affection for one another. They've waited all this time, and now at last Caroline is free. I'm so glad to think they have nothing to reproach themselves with. It's the happy ending to a fairy story.

REX [*Dejectedly*] I suppose you think the only thing I can do is to take myself off.

ISABELLA Robert may be here any minute.

REX I was looking forward enormously to our drive.

ISABELLA Are you in love with Caroline?

REX Desperately.

ISABELLA [*Putting her hand on his arm*] I'm so sorry. You must try and get over it.

REX I shall never do that.

ISABELLA But you knew about Robert.

REX He's forty-five if he's a day. No man can be seriously in love at that age.

ISABELLA Caroline oughtn't to have let you come here. She must have known that you cared for her.

REX She told me she was in love with Robert Oldham.

ISABELLA [*More and more sympathetic*] Are you awfully unhappy?

REX Awfully. Do you think there's no chance for me at all?

ISABELLA It would be cruel to hold out any hopes to you. None—none whatever.

REX [*Sombrely*] My hat!

ISABELLA Now you must go.

REX All right If you think I'd better You've been awfully kind to me

ISABELLA I've got such a soft heart and you've touched it

REX May I call you Isabella?

ISABELLA I'd like you to

[She gives him her hand He raises it to his lips and kisses it]

ISABELLA I'm such a sentimentalist Love always moves me

REX Good-bye

[Exit ISABELLA wipes the tiny tears that glisten in the corner of her eyes CAROLINE comes in She is a very attractive woman of thirty-five, tall, slim, with humorous eyes and a charming smile She is dressed for motoring]

ISABELLA Caroline!

CAROLINE Have I kept you waiting?

ISABELLA Why didn't you let me come up? I wanted to see you so badly

CAROLINE I don't let even my dearest friend see me till I've done my hair

ISABELLA I suppose you don't like your forehead?

CAROLINE Not much By the way, where is Rex? I saw his car from my window

ISABELLA I thought you wouldn't want to see him this morning I sent him away

CAROLINE Why on earth did you do that?

ISABELLA My dear, do you know he's in love with you?

CAROLINE I should be a perfect fool if I didn't

ISABELLA He hasn't told you so?

CAROLINE I'm beginning to think it's his only topic of conversation.

ISABELLA My dear, how can you be so flippant?

CAROLINE D'you think I ought to take him seriously?

ISABELLA [*Not without acidity*] Of course, he's very young,
I don't suppose he means half he says

CAROLINE [*Chaffing her*] Even if he means a quarter it's a
good deal

ISABELLA D'you think he wants to marry you?

CAROLINE I don't know I'm sure he wants to elope with
me

ISABELLA You're too exasperating, Caroline But I didn't
come here to talk about Rex

CAROLINE D'you call him Rex?

ISABELLA He asked me to just now.

CAROLINE [*Smiling*] Oh!

ISABELLA Now, Caroline, be serious *Is it true?* When I
read the births, deaths, and marriages in The Times this
morning, and suddenly saw your name, I could hardly
believe my eyes

CAROLINE Neither could I "On the 29th ult., at the
Edward and Alexandra Hospital, Nairobi, Stephen, only
son of the late Algernon Ashley of Bleane Woods,
Faversham, aged 41 By Cable"

ISABELLA It must be true

CAROLINE Of course, it's very circumstantial, but Stephen
had a peculiar sense of humour He's been reported dead
two or three times It's true, it's never got so far as
the obituary column of The Times before

ISABELLA Can't you make certain?

CAROLINE I telephoned to my solicitors and they've cabled
to Nairobi Somehow I think it is true this time

ISABELLA Shall you go into mourning?

CAROLINE I don't see why I should

ISABELLA I wouldn't unless you think it'll become you

CAROLINE After all, I haven't seen or heard of my husband for more than ten years. It would be hypocrisy to pretend that I regret his death.

ISABELLA I never knew exactly why you separated from him.

CAROLINE Oh, he had adenoids.

ISABELLA [*Smiling*] You are the most reserved person I ever met.

CAROLINE I managed not to discuss his failings while he was alive. I think I may just as well hold my tongue about them now he's dead.

ISABELLA Ah, well, whatever you suffered it's all over now. You've only got happiness to look forward to. Oh, my dear, marry Robert quickly. Don't let there be any delays. Heaven knows you've waited long enough.

CAROLINE Ten years.

ISABELLA Aren't you glad now that you have nothing to reproach yourselves with? I know, I'm very glad for you.

CAROLINE There was never any possibility of anything else. Of course, we might have bolted, but Robert has practised too long in the Divorce Court to fancy the rôle of co-respondent. Besides, he had nothing but his practice to live upon. And we were too fond of one another to risk the infinite tediousness of an affair.

ISABELLA Everyone must admire your strength.

CAROLINE It didn't require strength, only common sense.

ISABELLA Have you heard from him this morning?

CAROLINE No, I knew he had to be in chambers early.

ISABELLA He's certain to come round presently.

CAROLINE I shouldn't think so. He's in a case that's first on the list.

ISABELLA Aren't you excited? I wonder how you can bear your impatience

CAROLINE I can hardly expect Robert to throw up a case to come and propose to me, can I?

[COOPER enters to announce MAUDE FULTON *She is a smartly-dressed spinster not far off forty, with bright eyes and a vivacious manner. She has a sharp tongue. She is sentimental when other people are concerned, but exceedingly practical in her own affairs*

COOPER Miss Fulton

[Exit

MAUDE Oh, my dear, I've had a success. I've been followed in the street

CAROLINE [*Amused, greeting her*] Maudel

MAUDE I was rushing along here, when suddenly I realized that a man was following me. Well, I wanted to make sure, so I crossed to the other side of the street, and he crossed too. I slackened down. I was simply running along, I was so anxious to see you and dear Robert—and *he* slackened down

ISABELLA Weren't you frightened?

MAUDE Frightened? Of course not. I'm constantly being followed in the street. I like it. It gives an amusement to the dullest walk. Of course, it never goes any further

CAROLINE Do you say that with relief or with regret?

MAUDE Oh, my dear, I should never have a moment to myself if I listened to all the men who want to make love to me. Of course, I cannot make out what it is they see in me. I know I'm not beautiful, but there's evidently something about me that they can't resist

CAROLINE [*Chaffing her*] I expect it is that you throw yourself at their heads. I never knew a man yet who could resist that

MAUDE Oh, my dear, I quite forgot My best congratulations

CAROLINE On the death of my husband?

MAUDE And on your engagement to Robert Oldham

CAROLINE It's very kind of you, but I'm not engaged to Robert Oldham

MAUDE Oh, nonsense, that follows automatically on the death of your husband, like putting a penny in the slot and getting a piece of chocolate out I suppose he's running along to Somerset House now to get a special licence

CAROLINE My dear, don't be ridiculous He hasn't asked me to marry him

ISABELLA But he's going to

CAROLINE [*Thoughtfully*] I suppose he is

MAUDE What on earth d'you mean, Caroline? You know he is

CAROLINE [*With exasperation*] Yes, of course I do But don't badger me You talk as if we had to marry if we liked it or not I'm not going to force the man to marry me

MAUDE Oh, my dear, don't talk such nonsense He's been passionately in love with you for years

CAROLINE For years!

ISABELLA And you've been just as much in love with him, Caroline

CAROLINE I know I have

MAUDE You've both been looking forward to this moment even since you met one another?

CAROLINE And now it's come

ISABELLA What a funny thing to say, Caroline

CAROLINE It's the obvious thing to say, isn't it? I'm getting into training for married life

ISABELLA How strange you are this morning I expected to find you, oh, I scarcely know—tremulous, crying a little, perhaps

CAROLINE [*With a smile*] I suppose you were prepared to mingle your tears with mine

ISABELLA Happy tears I certainly didn't expect to find you

CAROLINE What?

MAUDE In a beastly temper, my dear

ISABELLA Be nice to Robert when he comes, Caroline Think how he must be hating that stupid case which is keeping him away Don't you know what his thoughts are? I do He's counting the minutes—why, I can almost hear the beating of his heart

CAROLINE What nonsense you talk, Isabella

ISABELLA Can't you see him, when he gets here at last, ringing the bell? And the time seems interminable till Cooper opens the door And then he'll run up the stairs four at a time

CAROLINE It's just like a penny novelette, isn't it? But he won't, because it would make him out of breath

ISABELLA As if he'll think of that, you foolish creature He'll just take you in his arms and say At last, at last—I see it all

MAUDE I'd love to be here I adore romance

CAROLINE I shall be greatly obliged if you'll both of you go away before he comes

ISABELLA Of course, darling There are moments when one has a right to be rid of prying eyes

MAUDE When did he say he was coming?

CAROLINE He hasn't said I've not heard from him this morning

MAUDE D'you mean to say he didn't telephone? I wonder why not

CAROLINE Perhaps he hadn't time to look at the paper He may not know

MAUDE Oh, nonsense

ISABELLA I think it's very natural he shouldn't have telephoned After all, Stephen Ashley *was* your husband Robert is a man of the greatest delicacy It may easily have occurred to him that just at that moment you might have certain memories that you preferred to be left alone with

CAROLINE How long do you give his delicacy?

MAUDE Till the court rises, personally

ISABELLA [*Smiling*] I believe you're just as impatient as I know he is

CAROLINE My dear, when you've been staying at the seaside, haven't you sometimes gone down to the beach meaning to have a bathe, and when you got there found the sea look very chilly? You try not to notice it You go into your bathing machine, and it's grey and comfortless But you take off your clothes and put on your bathing dress, and then you open the door You see in front of you a narrow bit of sea And it's cold and yellow and dreary and wet And your heart sinks

MAUDE The only thing then is not to think about it, but to jump in quickly

CAROLINE I'm wondering if that is what Robert is saying to himself just now

ISABELLA What on earth makes you think that?

CAROLINE It's a very good plan to ascribe your own feelings to other people

MAUDE My dear, you don't mean to say you're frightened?

CAROLINE [*Desperately*] Panic-stricken

ISABELLA How foolish you are, Caroline! You don't mean to say you have any doubt about Robert's devotion?

MAUDE Oh, is *that* what's troubling you?

ISABELLA Why, everyone knows he adores you. Don't you know how he speaks about you to your friends? I remember, last New Year's Eve when we were having supper together at the Savoy, I said to him. Doesn't it make you rather melancholy to think that another year is gone? No, he said, every New Year that comes brings me nearer to marrying Caroline.

CAROLINE He's a dear old thing. Of course, I know he loves me.

MAUDE We have inspired love, you and I, Caroline.

CAROLINE But your adorers don't put a pistol to your head and say. Marry me.

MAUDE No, but they frequently put one to their own and say they'll shoot themselves if I don't.

CAROLINE You're still a spinster, Maude, how do you meet the situation?

MAUDE I tell them the truth. After mature consideration I have come to the conclusion that one husband is not enough for one woman.

CAROLINE Good heavens, I found one much more than I wanted.

MAUDE That doesn't prove that you might not have found three more satisfactory.

ISABELLA Three!

MAUDE That is my ideal. I would live two days a week with each and have my Sundays to myself.

[The telephone bell rings]

ISABELLA That is Robert.

CAROLINE It can't be. He must be in court just now.

[She goes towards the telephone. It keeps on ringing.]

ISABELLA I have a presentiment. I'm convinced it's Robert.

[Just as CAROLINE is about to take the receiver she hesitates, she is very nervous.]

CAROLINE Answer for me, Maude, in case . . .

MAUDE Very well

[She takes up the receiver and listens]

CAROLINE I hate telephones I wish I'd never had one put in

MAUDE Who is that? No This is Miss Fulton speaking,
but I'll call Mrs Ashley—yes, I'll hold on.

CAROLINE Maude, who is it?

MAUDE *[Significantly]* Mr Oldham's clerk

CAROLINE *[Agitated]* Maude, say I can't speak to anybody
Say I'm out Say you don't know when I'll be in

MAUDE *[Into the receiver]* Is that you, Robert? This is Maud
Fulton Caroline is here Yes, she'll be delighted to
see you

CAROLINE Maude, I'm out I'm out, I tell you Say you've
made a mistake Maude, you cat!

MAUDE *[Taking no notice]* Yes, you'd better come round
at once Of course Caroline's disengaged, she's been
expecting you

CAROLINE *[Aghast]* Maudel

MAUDE Good-bye *[She puts down the receiver]* That settles
that

CAROLINE Maude, I'll never forgive you It's monstrous
You had no right to say all that I'll never speak to
you again as long as I live You said I'd been expecting
him

MAUDE Well, haven't you? And what's more, he knows
you've been expecting him After all these years it really
is not worth while for you to play hide-and-seek with
one another

CAROLINE It's so humiliating You've told him almost in
so many words that I'm sitting here waiting for him to
come and make me a proposal of marriage.

MAUDE So you are

CAROLINE Has the possibility occurred to you that I may refuse him?

MAUDE [*Decidedly*] No

CAROLINE Why not?

MAUDE You've let him wait for you year after year He's given you the best of his life He's sacrificed everything in the hope of marrying you some day Now you must marry him if you want to or not

ISABELLA But you do want to, Caroline?

CAROLINE [*Hesitatingly*] I thought so yesterday

ISABELLA You know he dotes on you You'll never find anyone who will love you so faithfully

CAROLINE It's loving that's the important thing, not being loved

MAUDE But you love him, Caroline Don't be so silly All your friends have known for ten years that you loved him You're not like me You're one of those constant women You've never bothered your head about another man since first you made Robert's acquaintance

ISABELLA Your feelings can't have changed from one day to another

CAROLINE I suppose they can't

ISABELLA You *must* accept him, Caroline

CAROLINE Yes, I know [*With a smile*] Don't be afraid I'm going to But don't be harsh with me It can't be very strange that I'm a little nervous In fact, I distinctly feel my heart beating in my boots

ISABELLA Never mind that The shyness you're feeling gives you a sort of tremulous charm which, I promise you, is very effective

CAROLINE I must go and put on some other things. It's only fair to Robert to set out the object he's going to purchase to the best advantage

ISABELLA No matter what you wear he'll think you ravishing

CAROLINE Dear Robert I know But for all that I will not be proposed to in a motor-coat

ISABELLA You're going to make him very happy

CAROLINE I think I am I was very foolish just now I'm beginning to feel more at ease After all, it is a great pleasure to know that after all his kindness to me, all his unselfish devotion, I have it in my power at last to give him his heart's desire

[Exit]

MAUDE That's that

ISABELLA Poor Caroline!

MAUDE Now, will you tell me what is the matter with her

ISABELLA [*With a shrug of shoulders*] Hope deferred When you've wanted something very badly and it comes at last, it is somehow a little frightening

MAUDE You're sure there isn't another man somewhere lurking in the background!

ISABELLA Oh, quite Rex Cunningham was here this morning, but she didn't see him I sent him away

MAUDE Very wise of you

ISABELLA I felt sorry for him He's desperately in love with her But I'm sure she isn't even interested in him. She's only known him three months

MAUDE A man you've known three months always has an advantage over a man you've known ten years

ISABELLA Now I know why you never married, Maude

MAUDE Why?

ISABELLA Because nobody asked you

MAUDE How did you guess?

ISABELLA Because you have common sense Men like it in a wife, but not in a girl

MAUDE I'm very glad you sent Rex away When next he comes he'll find everything settled

[Enter COOPER, followed by REX.]

COOPER Mr Cunningham

[Exit COOPER The two ladies are taken aback by his unexpected appearance He is not a little surprised to find ISABELLA still there]

REX Oh, I was expecting to find Caroline [Shaking hands with Miss FULTON] How do you do?

MAUDE [Promptly] She'll be down in one moment You must stay

REX I was going to

ISABELLA I thought you were going for a drive?

REX Alone? I just tootled round the Park, and then I made up my mind that I must see Caroline

MAUDE I quite understand It's nice of you to want to be the first

REX [Not comprehending] I beg your pardon?

MAUDE [Sweetly] To congratulate her on her engagement

REX [With consternation] What?

MAUDE You don't mean to say you didn't know? She's to be married to Robert Oldham almost directly I think it's so charming that these two dear people should come together after all these years And you know, they're madly in love with one another

REX But they weren't engaged a quarter of an hour ago

MAUDE Oh, that's nothing I've been frequently engaged and broken it off again within twelve minutes

REX Of course, that's quite comprehensible

MAUDE Do you think so? It isn't true

REX It might be Anyhow, I'm going to wait till I see Caroline

MAUDE Why?

REX Because I'm going to propose to her, if you want to know [*To ISABELLA*] I ought never to have let you chivvy me away It's impossible that she should marry Robert Oldham It'll break my heart If you have any kindness you won't try and prevent me from seeing her I must see her

MAUDE Of course, you must see her You'll hardly recognize her She looks ten years younger She's simply radiant I've never seen anyone look so happy How she adores that man! [*REX gives a gasp*] They're going to be married by special licence They've already made up their minds to go to Venice for their honeymoon Robert had to go away for a few minutes, she could hardly bear to let him out of her sight

REX [*Sinking down crushed*] My hat! I shall never get over this

ISABELLA [*Going up to him*] My poor boy! Rex! Rex!

REX It's just like my luck That's the sort of thing that always happens to me

MAUDE I never loved a young gazelle but it was sure to die

ISABELLA Maudel! [*To REX compassionately*] It breaks my heart to see you so wretched

REX Nobody ever cares for me

ISABELLA Don't say that It sounds so hopeless

REX [*Getting up*] I'd better go There's nothing for me to do here now

ISABELLA [*Taking his hand*] Where are you going?

REX I don't know, I don't care

ISABELLA I can't bear to see you like this. . . Won't you come and dine with me to-night?

REX You'll find me very dull.

ISABELLA Oh, no, I shan't

REX [*Still holding her hand*] Very well. You are good to me

ISABELLA Good-bye

REX You have an extraordinary gift of sympathy There's something about the blueness of your eyes that seems to console one

ISABELLA Dear Rex

[*He goes out with a bow to MAUDE*]

MAUDE Well, my dear, you're wasting no time

ISABELLA [*Indignantly*] Maude! The poor boy was absolutely broken up It made my heart bleed I couldn't let him go without a word of comfort

MAUDE H'm! Why did you ask him to dinner?

ISABELLA I thought he'd like to talk to me about Caroline I couldn't bear to think of him passing the whole evening by himself He would have been too wretched

MAUDE Oh, well, with a husband safely tucked away in India you can afford to be a sympathetic friend

ISABELLA What things you said to him! It simply made my hair stand on end

MAUDE Don't you think it was much the best thing to do? Caroline is in a funny mood There's something pathetic and rather charming about that young man I don't deny it for a minute I've got a heart just as much as you have, my dear There's no knowing what Caroline might have done in a moment of emotion It was much better to face him with the accomplished fact

ISABELLA You're a wonderful liar, Maude

MAUDE Don't be idiotic, my dear To lie well is one of the privileges of our sex I don't lie any better than you do Besides, were they lies? I was only anticipating In half an hour all I said will be true

ISABELLA I don't say you weren't justified

MAUDE And what is half an hour? Just think how time changes from one place to another Why, Caroline's engagement is already ancient history in Petrograd

ISABELLA Yes, if you look at it like that it's a white lie at the utmost

MAUDE Oh, my dear, not even that Hardly more than a fib

[COOPER comes in followed by ROBERT OLDHAM
ROBERT is a tall handsome man of five-and-forty, well-preserved, but inclined to stoutness, he is well dressed, well cared for, and evidently desirous to hold on to a semblance of youth]

COOPER Mr Oldham

[Exit

MAUDE [*Enthusiastically*] Robert!

ISABELLA [*Sympathetically*] Dear Robert

[ROBERT is a little taken aback at the warmth of his greeting, but he braces himself and advances into the room]

ROBERT You welcome me as though I'd had a narrow shave of being run over by a motor-bus

ISABELLA We're very glad to see you

MAUDE We've been waiting for you all the morning

ROBERT Oh! [*With an effort at alacrity*] I wish I'd known
[*Shakes hands with MAUDE*] How do you do?

MAUDE I *must* kiss you

ROBERT Must you?

MAUDE [*Drawing back coyly*] Don't you want me to?

ROBERT Of course I do I'd like it

[*He offers her his cheek and she kisses him*]

MAUDE Now don't pretend you're as cool as a cucumber
Men are so silly They're so afraid of their emotions
Of course, you're all in a flutter Let me feel your pulse

ROBERT I shall not You're very familiar with me, Maude,
I don't like it

MAUDE Dear Robert

ROBERT [*To ISABELLA, taking her hand*] And how are you, dear lady?

[She leaves her hand in his. It must be a habit of hers]

ISABELLA [*A little tremulously*] I hardly know what to say to you. Oh, Robert, I'm so happy in your happiness. Isn't it wonderful? After all these years—it's so stupid of me, I almost feel as if I could cry.

ROBERT You have a wonderful heart, Isabella.

ISABELLA You know I'm not clever. I can't express myself, but believe me, I feel all that you could wish me to feel.

ROBERT You may kiss me if you wish to.

ISABELLA [*Laughing*] I don't.

ROBERT A rebuff.

MAUDE But how on earth have you managed to get here?

ROBERT By the drastic method of taking a taxi.

MAUDE Don't be exasperating. We were under the impression you had a case this morning.

ROBERT Who is we?

MAUDE Caroline, Isabella, and myself.

ROBERT I see. No, a case which was expected to finish yesterday has turned out rather a long one. I dare say we shan't come on to-day at all.

MAUDE [*Promptly*] Then why didn't you come earlier?

ROBERT It's only midday. I know that Caroline is not an early riser.

MAUDE You might have telephoned.

ROBERT I had some papers to read. Business before pleasure, you know. Have you been discussing my silence?

ISABELLA [*Smiling*] I think I was right after all. I put it down to delicacy. Any nice man would realize that just

at that moment a woman must prefer to be alone with her recollections

MAUDE Anyhow, the important thing is that you're here now And if I know you at all you've got a ring in your pocket

[ROBERT gives a slight start]

ISABELLA Oh, Robert, do show it me! I'd love to see it

ROBERT But I haven't got a ring I went straight to chambers this morning and then I came straight here It never occurred to me

MAUDE You stupid man! Caroline would have been so pleased

ISABELLA And touched But never mind, when she sees you she'll think of nothing but that she's free and you're here And for ever and ever you'll be here Oh, Robert, be kind to her! Remember all she's gone through You can never do too much for her

ROBERT I know

MAUDE Have you made up your mind where you're going to spend your honeymoon?

ROBERT My dear Maude, it's only a couple of hours ago that I saw the sad news of Stephen Ashley's death

MAUDE Sad, do you call them?

ROBERT For him, I mean Of course, not for me I don't suppose there's anybody who isn't cared for by someone or other. I expect somebody is regretting him

MAUDE I very much doubt it I think we may safely look upon his death as a happy release

ROBERT I don't know why you say that You know nothing about him except that he had adenoids.

ISABELLA It's so splendid of Caroline never to have said a single word against him

ROBERT Oh, splendid But, after all, a man may have

adenoids and yet be possessed of all kinds of—admirable qualities

MAUDE You're not going to stand up for him If Caroline refused to say anything against him, it's certainly not because there was nothing to say

ROBERT Of course not

MAUDE It almost sounded as if you were taking his part

ROBERT Good heavens, don't be so literal I was making a general observation That's why conversation is impossible with women They *will* find a personal application in a general statement Besides, a man with my particular experience knows that a person may have all manner of virtues and yet be insupportable to live with

ISABELLA Fortunately that isn't the case with Caroline

ROBERT Oh, no, Caroline is wonderful Who should know it better than I?

MAUDE Personally, I recommend you to go to Venice

ROBERT [*As though he were just on the verge of starting*] Now?

MAUDE For your honeymoon I mean

ROBERT Oh, I beg your pardon, I'd forgotten for the moment Can you quite see us gushing up and down the Grand Canal? I fancy we've known one another a little too long for Venice

MAUDE Oh, but marriage makes such a difference You'll have to make one another's acquaintance all over again

ROBERT [*Not without anxiety*] D'you think it'll change Caroline much? I don't know that I should wish that exactly You see I'm used to this Caroline

MAUDE. She'll be just the same, only more so

ROBERT That is reassuring, but rather vague My idea would be rather to make a tour of the capitals of Europe

MAUDE But you'd spend all your time in railway stations

ROBERT I know That is precisely where a man shows his superiority to a woman She is flustered and nervous She's certain they'll miss the train But he is calm He sees to the luggage nonchalantly He has the tickets safe. He keeps an eagle eye on the umbrellas This is a man—every inch of him, she says, I am but a poor weak woman Believe me, those are very good lines on which to start married life I think the capitals of Europe

ISABELLA My own impression is that Caroline will want to go to some quiet little place by the seaside

ROBERT I don't look my best in bathing costume

ISABELLA She'll want to be alone with you surely

ROBERT I won't bathe Nothing will induce me to bathe I hate cold water I was only thinking this morning how I hated the sea

MAUDE [*Surprised*] This morning Why?

ROBERT I don't know It just occurred to me Haven't you made up your mind sometimes in a weak moment to go and have a bathe? You go down to the beach and the sea looks icy You try not to notice it You go into your bathing machine, and it's cold and smelly But you take off your clothes and put on your bathing costume, and then you open the door and you see in front of you a narrow bit of sea And you wish you were dead

[*During this speech MAUDE and ISABELLA have first pricked up their ears, then stared at him, and, finally, they turn and look at one another with amazement*
CAROLINE comes in *She is now charmingly gowned*

ROBERT How do you do?

CAROLINE How d'you do?

MAUDE You absurd things

CAROLINE. [*Sharply*] Don't be ridiculous, Maude.

ISABELLA We really ought to be going, dear

CAROLINE Oh, aren't you going to stay to luncheon?

ISABELLA [*Obviously inventing*] I'm lunching out So are you, Maude, aren't you?

MAUDE Yes

CAROLINE Oh, well, it's early yet Don't go

MAUDE I'm so sorry, but I must go and be tried on It's such a bore

ISABELLA You might drop me, perhaps, I have an appointment with my dentist Good-bye, darling

CAROLINE Good-bye It's been so nice to see you

[*They kiss one another*]

ISABELLA Good-bye

MAUDE [*To ROBERT*] Dear Robert, we leave her in your care

ISABELLA Dear, dear Robert

[*They go out*]

ROBERT That's how elephants must behave when they're being tactful

CAROLINE How is it you're here so early? I wasn't expecting you till after the courts rose

ROBERT Oh I managed to get away Maude said you were expecting me

CAROLINE Yes, I was expecting you to tea Don't you remember, you said yesterday you'd look in

ROBERT I suppose I couldn't have a whisky and soda?

CAROLINE Yes, of course I'll ring [*She touches the bell*]

ROBERT I've got to be back in chambers by one

CAROLINE You must keep your eye on the time You mustn't be late

ROBERT [*Making conversation*] What a nice woman Isabella is Pity she doesn't get on with her husband

CAROLINE Oh, but she does, only she gets on better with him when he's in India and she's in England They're devoted to one another from a distance

ROBERT There's something curiously feminine and sympathetic about her She's not clever, but she's extraordinarily restful I can imagine a man being extremely attached to Isabella

CAROLINE She's still quite pretty

ROBERT But, of course, one doesn't know what she'd be like to live with always That's so different, isn't it?

CAROLINE [*With conviction*] Oh, absolutely [*COOPER comes in*] Bring up the whisky and soda, Cooper, and a glass

COOPER Very good, madam.

[*Exit COOPER*]

ROBERT It reminds me of the case I'm in just now Did you ever meet the Petersens?

CAROLINE I don't think so

ROBERT Quite a nice woman She was a Mrs Macdougall I've known Petersen for twenty years I'd never have thought him capable of things like that

CAROLINE What did he do?

ROBERT Oh, well, he'd been devoted to Mrs Macdougall for years It was an old-standing affair Everybody accepted it One always asked them to dinner together At last they persuaded Macdougall to let himself be divorced I'm acting for Mrs Petersen now

CAROLINE I must be very stupid, but where does Mrs Petersen come? You've not mentioned her before

ROBERT Mrs Petersen was Mrs. Macdougall, you see, they got the divorce from Macdougall, then they married, and now they're divorcing

CAROLINE Oh, I see Of course Very natural How long have they been married?

ROBERT Eighteen months And now they can't stand the sight of one another She says he's dull when he's sober and brutal when he's drunk

CAROLINE Ah! And what does he say?

ROBERT He marvels at his self-control He can't imagine why he never killed her

[*A short silence COOPER comes in with the whisky She goes out ROBERT helps himself*]

ROBERT I did a very unprofessional thing I had a chat with Petersen in the club the other night I told him I couldn't discuss the matter, but he insisted on telling me that he had no ill-feeling towards me because I was appearing for his wife He said he only had himself to blame

CAROLINE That was nice of him

ROBERT Oh, he didn't mean it like that He meant he ought to have known better than to marry her He said if a woman couldn't get on with one husband you might bet your boots she wouldn't get on with another [*There is a momentary silence*] Very nice whisky this is of yours, Caroline

CAROLINE You ought to like it You chose it

[*He takes out a cigarette and lights it elaborately, pretending he is quite at ease*]

ROBERT So your husband has died at last, Caroline

CAROLINE Yes

ROBERT I suppose you don't know what he died of?

CAROLINE No, I have no idea

ROBERT Fever, I suppose A man has to have a very fine physique to stand those climates indefinitely.

CAROLINE Stephen had a very fine physique

ROBERT I suppose it was a great surprise to you when you read the announcement in this morning's Times?

CAROLINE Yes, it was

ROBERT After all, death, even that of a person who was indifferent to you, is always a shock

CAROLINE Yes, when a man is dead you seem only to remember his good qualities

ROBERT It must be over ten years since you've seen him I remember, when first I met you, you'd only been separated about three months You haven't changed a bit in these ten years, Caroline

CAROLINE I'm afraid that's only your fancy You've seen me almost every day since then, and you naturally wouldn't notice any difference in me

ROBERT That's true In a way it's been a wonderful ten years, Caroline We've found constant amusement in one another's society You've been a great help to me You've seen me rise from a struggling junior to a pretty good position I don't see why I shouldn't be a judge before I die

CAROLINE We've had some very good times together, haven't we?

ROBERT Wonderful

CAROLINE You've been a dear, Robert You've always been so kind and patient

ROBERT It certainly hasn't been hard to be either.

CAROLINE And you've got certain points that are strangely endearing You never forget the little anniversaries that men find a bore to remember, but that women think so much of You never fail to send me a little present on my birthday Why, you even remember the day we first met and send me flowers Ten times you've done that, Robert

ROBERT By George, if this had only happened ten years ago What a difference it would have made to us We should be quite an old married couple by now, Caroline.

CAROLINE Do you wish it had?

ROBERT What a question! Why, every day for ten years I've read the obituary column of *The Times* for that notice It added a savour to breakfast

CAROLINE And now at last it's come

ROBERT I realize that I've lost for ever the little thrill of excitement that I always had when I took up the paper I've often wished that your name began with a V or a W instead of an A, so that I might be able to prolong the agony a little as I read deliberately down the column

CAROLINE There's always something a little melancholy in getting what one wants

ROBERT Do you know, Caroline, I've never even seen a photograph of your husband

CAROLINE I'm afraid I haven't one When we separated I destroyed everything that could possibly remind me of him

ROBERT I know I shall never even know what that man looked like, and yet he has influenced my life more than anyone else in the world What sort of a man was he, Caroline?

CAROLINE An ordinary sort of man.

ROBERT It's rather queer if you come to think of it If he hadn't lived I should have had an entirely different life, if he'd died years ago I should be another man from what I am now Just by existing, a thousand miles away, obscurely, he's made me what I am

CAROLINE Then we have at least something to be grateful to him for

ROBERT Caroline, what a charming thing to say!

CAROLINE I never thought of it before, but I suppose I, too, have been influenced by Stephen, even though I never set eyes on him I shouldn't be what I am either but for him

ROBERT Life is a strange business, Caroline.

CAROLINE I'm beginning to think so

[*A short silence*]

ROBERT Well, I expect you've got a lot of things to do I mustn't keep you

CAROLINE And you have an appointment, haven't you? You mustn't be late for that

ROBERT Oh, I've got my eye on the time

CAROLINE Yes, I imagined you had

ROBERT I thought I'd like to have a little chat with you at once

CAROLINE It was kind of you to come, it's been pleasant to see you

ROBERT I'll look in again about tea-time, may I?

CAROLINE Oh, yes, that'll be nice I dare say I can get one or two people so that we can have a rubber of bridge before dinner

ROBERT That always rests me after I've been in court Well, good-bye, Caroline, God bless you

CAROLINE Good-bye I hope you win your case

ROBERT Thanks

[*He goes to the door and opens it She steps towards the bell to ring At the door he hesitates She looks at him and pauses He half shuts the door and meditates She withdraws her hand from the bell He opens the door again, and she stretches out her hand once more He braces himself for the ordeal, shuts the door quickly and comes back into the room She turns away from the bell*]

ROBERT [*With assumed cheerfulness*] I was almost forgetting the purpose of my visit

CAROLINE Oh! Didn't you come just to pass the time of day?

ROBERT Well, not exactly, I think I'll just have a little drop more whisky if you don't mind I can't imagine why my throat is so dry this morning

CAROLINE I dare say there's a touch of east in the wind

ROBERT [*Pouring out the whiskey*] Well, Caroline, what shall we do about it?

CAROLINE About what?

ROBERT [*Very busy with the siphon*] When would you like us to be married?

CAROLINE Well, I haven't thought about the matter

ROBERT We arranged that we would be as soon as your husband died

CAROLINE Yes, I know

ROBERT [*With assumed facetiousness*] It only remains for you to name the day

CAROLINE I'm not going to name one

ROBERT My dear Caroline, you must That is by old established custom the privilege of your sex

CAROLINE What day would you suggest?

ROBERT Obstinate woman! I suppose you'll want some time to get a trousseau And then banns take three weeks, don't they? I couldn't get away till the end of term, anyhow What about the beginning of the Long Vacation?

CAROLINE I'm not going to marry you, Robert

ROBERT Caroline!

CAROLINE I've thought it over very carefully and I've completely made up my mind

ROBERT Do you mean to tell me that nothing I can say will induce you to change it?

CAROLINE [*With a twinkle in her eyes*] No

ROBERT This is an awful shock to me, Caroline This is an awful blow I've been living in hopes of this moment

for years, and now now . you could knock
me down with a feather

CAROLINE [*With her tongue in her cheek*] I'm sorry to cause
you pain, Robert, but, believe me, I am acting for
the best

ROBERT Do you mean to say that you absolutely refuse to
marry me?

CAROLINE Absolutely

ROBERT [*A little uneasily*] Caroline, has anything in my
behaviour led you to imagine that my heart wasn't set
on marrying you? Would your answer have been
different if I had expressed myself differently? Women
are very strange. Haven't I been ardent enough? You
must remember that I'm a shy man. This is an occasion
when one may reasonably feel a certain embarrassment.
I'm no longer in my first youth, Caroline. I should have
felt ridiculous if I'd thrown myself on one knee and all
that sort of thing. I have had no wide and varied
experience in making proposals of marriages.

CAROLINE Really. In that case I can only congratulate you.
You made this one as though to the manner born. You
were as cool as though you were ordering a dozen
oysters and a pint of champagne.

ROBERT I didn't feel it, Caroline. I was shaking in every
limb.

CAROLINE After all, you came to the point at once. I've
known men with whom it required months of patience
on the part of the object of their affections to bring
them to it.

ROBERT Then I cannot understand why you refused me.

CAROLINE My dear Robert, we've been very happy in one
another's company for ten years. We've been joined
together by a very charming sentiment. Don't you think
it would be a pity to expose it to the wear and tear of
domestic life?

ROBERT You're a wonderful woman, Caroline

CAROLINE Oh, it *had* occurred to you

ROBERT It hadn't exactly occurred to me, but it had crossed my mind After all, one has to look at these things from a rational point of view We're very well as we are

CAROLINE It seems a pity to make a change

ROBERT Not a pity, Caroline, a risk

CAROLINE Then you agree that I was wise to refuse you?

ROBERT From your point of view, Caroline, I dare say there's a great deal to be said in favour of your decision I, of course, could only have gained by the change

CAROLINE It's nice of you to say so But are you sure that you're not a little relieved that I refused you?

ROBERT I? My dear Caroline, can't you see I'm overwhelmed with disappointment?

CAROLINE It's not visible to the naked eye, Robert

ROBERT You forget I have great power of self-control

CAROLINE I shouldn't be hurt if you confessed that at the bottom of your heart you were feeling as though you'd deliberately put your head in a noose, and then by a merciful interposition of Providence

ROBERT [*Interrupting*] Caroline, I have been wanting to marry you for years And now that the opportunity at last occurs you refuse me Well, I accept your reasons I bow to the inevitable I know you too well to try to make you change your mind, but don't think because I take it like this that my heart isn't

CAROLINE Seared

ROBERT Are you laughing at me, Caroline?

[He looks at her She begins to chuckle For a moment he assumes a pose of indignation She tries to restrain her laughter, but finds it impossible, he is gained by it, and begins to laugh also Then they both rour and the tears run down their cheeks]

ROBERT Caroline, you're adorable

CAROLINE You humbug, Robert

ROBERT My dear, I had to do it And I've done it, mind
you, I've done it

CAROLINE Yes, you've done it And now we'll forget all
about it

ROBERT You know, I was terrified, Caroline

CAROLINE Poor dear, I know Your heart was in your
boots, wasn't it?

ROBERT You don't bear me a grudge?

CAROLINE Of course not

ROBERT You're wonderful, Caroline Upon my soul, I
could almost marry you

CAROLINE Dearest, I could very nearly consent to be your
wife.

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is the same

It is a little after four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day

CAROLINE is standing by the window looking out COOPER comes in

COOPER Mrs Gilliatt has rung up to say she hopes you haven't forgotten you're going to tea with her at Rumplemeyer's, madam

CAROLINE I haven't forgotten, Cooper But I haven't the least intention of going

COOPER I said I'd give you the message, ma'am, but I said I didn't think you were feeling very well

CAROLINE It hadn't occurred to me, but I don't think I *am* feeling very well I wish it would rain It's so exasperating when the weather doesn't fit in with one's moods

COOPER Shall I ring up Mrs Gilliatt and say you're sorry you can't come to tea, ma'am?

CAROLINE Yes, I think I'll lie down. The more I think of it the more I think I'm not very well

[She lies down on the sofa]

COOPER When one's feeling like what you are, ma'am, it always makes one feel better not to feel very well

CAROLINE *[Smiling]* That's rather confused, Cooper, but I believe it's quite true Put a lot of cushions behind me *[This COOPER does]* Thank you Now put the cigarettes where I can reach them

COOPER *[Fetching them]* Yes, madam.

CAROLINE There are two books over there Let me have

them, will you? Thank you And give me the picture papers There!

COOPER Shall I cover up your feet, ma'am?

CAROLINE You might put that Spanish shawl over them,
Cooper It's always satisfactory to look nice even if there's no one to see you

[COOPER carries out CAROLINE's various directions]

COOPER There, ma'am Is there anything else?

CAROLINE No I feel better already I'm not at home to anybody, and I won't speak to anyone on the telephone

COOPER Very good, ma'am

CAROLINE I'm extremely pleased with my own society,
Cooper It's very nice to be alone when one wants to I like to think it's my own house and nobody can cross my threshold without permission It's really very pleasant to be one's own mistress

COOPER Some people like a man about the house, ma'am, and some people don't

CAROLINE I don't

COOPER Ah, well, ma'am, you're one of the lucky ones, you can please yourself

CAROLINE Cooper, what *do* you mean? You're not dissatisfied with your young man?

COOPER No, ma'am, not exactly that But I don't know as I'd marry him if I 'ad anything better to look forward to

CAROLINE But you're not obliged to marry him, Cooper

COOPER Him or somebody else It's not very satisfactory being in service all your life And it isn't so easy for a parlourmaid to find places when she's getting on a bit

CAROLINE Tell me, Cooper, how did he propose?

COOPER Well, ma'am, I don't know as he exactly proposed at all You see, it was like this I'd been walking out

with him for something like two years, and he never said anything that you could take hold of, so to speak, so at last I said to him Well, what about it? What about what? he said You know what I mean, I said I do not, he said Well, do you mean it or do you not? I said Is it a riddle? he said No, I said, but I've been walking out with you for two years, and I just want to know if anything's to come of it or not Oh, he said I don't mind one way or the other, I said, but I'm not going to waste my time till doomsday, and I just want to know, that's all Well, he said, what do you propose? Well, I said, what about August Bank Holiday? Make it Christmas, he said, I get a rise then All right, I said, as long as I know where I am I don't mind waiting, but I like to know where I am

CAROLINE It wasn't very romantic, Cooper

COOPER Well, ma'am, my belief is that men don't want to marry It's not in their nature You 'ave to give them a little push or you'll never bring them to it

CAROLINE And supposing they regret it afterwards, Cooper?

COOPER Oh, well, ma'am, it's too late then And you know, ma'am, they generally try to make the best of it when they know they can't help themselves

CAROLINE And let us look on the bright side of things, Cooper, they're often not unhappy, poor brutes

COOPER Oh, no, ma'am, I think they're much happier, but sometimes they won't realize it, so to speak

CAROLINE That's human nature, Cooper You won't forget to telephone to Mrs Gilliatt

COOPER [*Going*] No, ma'am, I'll ring her up at once

CAROLINE Oh, and Cooper, you might ring up Dr Cornish and ask him if he can come round

COOPER I thought you were feeling better, ma'am?

CAROLINE I am, but I think it would comfort me to see a doctor To be able to talk about oneself without fear of interruption is cheap at half a guinea

COOPER Very good, ma'am

[*Exit CAROLINE settles herself more comfortably than ever on the sofa, she takes one of the illustrated papers and begins to look at it The door is quietly opened, and MAUDE FULTON puts a roguish head round the corner*]

MAUDE May I come in?

CAROLINE Good heavens, how you startled me!

MAUDE Say I may come in, Caroline

CAROLINE No, you may not come in

MAUDE [*Edging herself in*] Don't be brutal, Caroline

CAROLINE I think I've got scarlet fever

MAUDE [*Opening the door a little more*] I've had it

CAROLINE On the other hand, it may be small-pox

MAUDE [*Coming right in*] I'm constantly being vaccinated

CAROLINE I'm not at home, Maude

MAUDE I know, but I felt sure you'd see me Cooper didn't want to let me come up

CAROLINE Servants are not what they were She should only have let you force your way over her inanimate corpse

MAUDE Darling, surely a corpse couldn't be anything else but inanimate

CAROLINE Just as an intruder couldn't be anything else but intolerable

MAUDE Now that you've had the last word, offer me a cup of tea and tell me all about it

CAROLINE I shall *not*, Maude.

MAUDE Now don't be ridiculous, Caroline I felt I *must* see you You can't expect me to be entirely devoid of curiosity

CAROLINE After knowing you for twenty years? No, my dear, I don't. But, on the other hand, you can't expect me to be such a fool as to gratify it.

MAUDE I naturally wanted to be the first to congratulate you [*Insinuatingly*]. Caroline, tell me now how he did it.

CAROLINE D'you think it's fair to a man to tell a third party what romantic madness seized his tongue at such a moment?

MAUDE [*Eagerly*] Oh, my dear, go on. I'm thrilled to the core.

CAROLINE [*She looks at her with an ironical smile*] I was standing in the middle of the room, Maude, and he came up to me, and fell on one knee.

MAUDE Yes, Sir Walter Raleigh.

CAROLINE He took my hand. I turned a little away.

MAUDE Yes, yes.

CAROLINE At last, he said, at last! Oh, I have waited for this moment for a hundred years. I know I am utterly unworthy of you, but I adore the very ground you tread on. You are my ideal of woman. Oh, Caroline, Caroline, will you be mine? Clarence, I said.

MAUDE Robert, you mean, surely.

CAROLINE [*Bursting into laughter*] You fool, Maude. Can you see Robert making such a perfect ass of himself?

MAUDE Really, Caroline, you are exasperating.

CAROLINE Shall I tell you the honest truth?

MAUDE [*Acidly*] If you can.

CAROLINE He fiddled about with a siphon, and said: Well, when would you like to be married?

MAUDE Oh! I prefer the other way, but after all it comes to the same in the end. Darling, I congratulate you with all my heart.

CAROLINE On getting an offer at my time of life? Thank you very much

MAUDE Don't be so silly On your engagement.

CAROLINE But I'm not engaged

MAUDE What *are* you talking about?

CAROLINE I refused him

MAUDE Good heavens! Why?

CAROLINE I thought I should be happier if I remained as I was

MAUDE Caroline, how cruel of you! How abominably selfish! But what did Robert say?

CAROLINE He was almost too much surprised for words

MAUDE Wasn't he overwhelmed?

CAROLINE I could see it was a disappointment, but he did all he could not to make it more difficult for me

MAUDE I can hardly believe my ears. What are you going to do, then?

CAROLINE I'm going to remain a widow And to make it quite clear, I shall go into mourning Crêpe and weeds and all the trappings of woe [MAUDE meditates for a moment, while CAROLINE watches her, wondering whether she accepts her account of the incident] D'you think they'll suit me?

MAUDE [*Tartly*] If they don't, I think you can be trusted not to wear them long

CAROLINE I don't see why you should be cross with me

MAUDE I'm disappointed in you, Caroline, and I'm very, very, very sorry for Robert

CAROLINE Marry him, then.

MAUDE I'm not a marrying woman

CAROLINE Neither am I Sisters in adversity.

MAUDE Of course, he'll ask you again

CAROLINE He's not such a fool

MAUDE What do you mean by that?

CAROLINE [*Seeing that she has nearly given herself away*] He knows he can go on asking me till he's blue in the face and I shall say no

MAUDE Then there's nothing more to be said

CAROLINE Nothing

[*COOPER comes in to announce* DR CORNISH *This is a very stout, red-faced, jovial gentleman, with an optimistic view of life*]

COOPER Dr Cornish

CAROLINE How do you do? Cooper, did you send that message?

COOPER Yes, ma'am Mrs Gilliatt said she'd just heard the dreadful news, and it must be a terrible shock and she quite understood, you had her sincerest sympathy, and she hoped you wouldn't forget that you were playing bridge with her to-morrow afternoon

CAROLINE Thank you

[*Exit COOPER*]

CAROLINE [*Turning to* DR CORNISH] Now I can attend to you

DR CORNISH That's what I've come to do to you

CAROLINE You know Miss Fulton?

DR CORNISH [*Shaking hands with her*] A homeopath, I believe

MAUDE Oh, no, I've given that up But I've got a wonderful bone-setter that I go to now

DR CORNISH Dear me, have you been breaking your bones?

MAUDE No, but I might

DR CORNISH I can recommend a very competent motor-omnibus if you are looking for something to run over you

CAROLINE Now, Maude, Dr Cornish has come to see me professionally You've stayed quite long enough

MAUDE Are you ill, darling?

CAROLINE I shall know that when Dr Cornish has examined me

MAUDE I thought you weren't looking quite up to the mark Of course I'll go

CAROLINE And don't come back till you're sent for

MAUDE Dear Caroline It's lucky I know she's devoted to me, or I might take offence at some of the things she says to me Good-bye, Dr Cornish

DR CORNISH [*Shaking hands with her*] Does the bone-setter make love to you?

MAUDE Not more than most men

[*Exit*]

DR CORNISH Now, dear lady, what is the matter with you?

CAROLINE Ill-temper

DR CORNISH An ailment very distressing to ladies' maids, I've always understood I noticed you were suffering from it

CAROLINE I didn't send for you so that you might have the pleasure of making yourself disagreeable and earning half a guinea into the bargain

DR CORNISH It does seem unfair, doesn't it? Let me feel your pulse

CAROLINE [*As he takes her wrist*] There's nothing wrong with my body It's my mind

DR CORNISH What is amiss with that?

CAROLINE Well, for one thing I don't know it

DR CORNISH The British Empire is governed exclusively by gentlemen who suffer from the same complaint You mustn't let that worry you

CAROLINE I'm vexed and bored

DR CORNISH Has this got anything to do with the announcement I read in this morning's paper? I can well understand that the loss of a husband might cause any woman a momentary vexation

CAROLINE No, I don't think it's that I've just redecorated my dining-room, and I don't think it's quite a success And, you know, these new fashions don't suit me I'm not pleased with any of the clothes I bought this spring I dare say I'm a little run down and want a change of air

DR CORNISH Quite so Quite so Now tell me the truth

CAROLINE But I'm telling you the truth

DR CORNISH Yes, I know, but the true truth Women make such distinction between the two

CAROLINE [*Smiling*] You must have a very large practice, Dr Cornish

DR CORNISH I get along Now come, dear lady

CAROLINE I sent for you because I wanted to tell you the truth I've known you so long, and I can trust you You know, I'm devoted to Robert Oldham I've wanted to marry him ever since we first met And now that the opportunity has come, I don't want to

DR CORNISH I see

CAROLINE Of course, nobody knows Robert thinks I'm dying to marry him And all my friends You see, it was an understood thing that we should marry as soon as I was free He's waited for me all these years

DR CORNISH It's awkward, isn't it? I can see that Robert Oldham will think you a little unreasonable He's no longer a young man

CAROLINE That is what I said to myself I thought the matter over from every standpoint I remembered Robert's infinite patience, his devotion and self-sacrifice, and I made up my mind that it was my duty to marry him.

DR CORNISH It's hard to speak of duty in these matters, but if you ask my opinion, in this particular case I think you're right

CAROLINE He came here this morning I discovered that he didn't want to marry me in the least

DR CORNISH Well, that simplifies matters.

CAROLINE It does nothing of the kind I was prepared to sacrifice myself I'd made up my mind to an act of renunciation I'd promised myself that he should never, never know the truth You don't think it's pleasant to realize suddenly that you're not wanted, and you can keep your self-sacrifice It's enough to make any woman feel not very well

DR CORNISH Now, don't work yourself up into a scene dear lady

CAROLINE Why not?

DR CORNISH I've seen so many I assure you they have no effect on me at all

CAROLINE In that case it isn't worth while, is it? But it is vexatious, Dr Cornish, isn't it?

DR CORNISH Very

CAROLINE Upon my word I could almost wish my husband were alive again [*No sooner are the words out of her mouth than the telephone bell rings*] Good heavens, how it startled me! I told Cooper I wouldn't speak to anyone Oh, I know what it is It's my solicitor They've had the answer to my cable [*She takes up the receiver and listens*] Yes Lester and Lester? I was expecting you to ring me up Yes, I'll hold on [*To DR CORNISH*] They're putting me through to Sir Henry Oh, the suspense! You know, I've had two or three false alarms of Stephen's death before Oh, if he's only alive this time it'll make such a difference It'll put an end to all my difficulties [*Speaking into the receiver*] Yes Sir

Henry? You haven't had an answer to your cable?
Then Oh! [*To DR CORNISH*] He's seen Stephen's
solicitor [*Listening*] I see Thank you very much It
was kind of you to ring me up Good-bye

[She puts down the receiver]

DR CORNISH Well?

CAROLINE Stephen's solicitor has had a further cable from
Nairobi It appears my husband died in the hospital
there four days ago of cirrhosis of the liver Is that the
sort of disease he would die from?

DR CORNISH You must know that better than I I never
knew him.

CAROLINE Could brandy bring it on?

DR CORNISH Nothing better

CAROLINE Then that settles it There can be no more doubt
I'm free

DR CORNISH Don't say it so despondently It's a condition
that most married people aspire to

CAROLINE Doesn't it strike you that there's something dis-
tressingly obvious in being a widow? I can quite under-
stand why a more delicate civilization than ours ordered
the immolation of widows on their husband's pyre

DR CORNISH My dear lady, you take too gloomy a view of
the situation From the days of the ancients a certain
gaiety has been ascribed to the condition which you
now adorn

CAROLINE I refuse to be gay My husband spited me for ten
years by living, now he spites me more than ever before
by dying

DR CORNISH D'you know what's the matter with you?

CAROLINE If you say appendicitis I'll kill you

DR CORNISH I wish I could, for that is an ailment which
can be cured by a trifling operation But there's no
escape from the malady I have in mind There's no cure

There are no palliatives even The most eminent physician in the world can do no more than offer sympathy and consolation

CAROLINE My dear Dr Cornish, you freeze the very marrow in my bones Tell me what it is quickly I will brace myself to bear the worst.

DR CORNISH Middle age

CAROLINE Say that again.

DR CORNISH Middle age

CAROLINE Impossible! Oh, impossible!

DR CORNISH Let me suggest one or two symptoms to you Haven't you noticed lately how young the policemen are about the streets? Why, they're mere boys But when you were a girl, don't you remember, they were middle-aged men

CAROLINE Now that you come to speak of it I *have* noticed that the policemen are very young nowadays

DR CORNISH And when you're in a house party, haven't you noticed that some of the young people are really very rowdy? It's lucky they keep more or less to themselves because their conversation really is very tedious

CAROLINE But it *is* very tedious

DR CORNISH It's just the same as it was fifteen years ago, and you didn't find it so then

CAROLINE You're beginning to frighten me

DR CORNISH You're devoted to dancing, aren't you?

CAROLINE [*Brightly*] Passionately That, at all events, hasn't left me

DR CORNISH But don't you find by about one in the morning you're rather tired and quite ready to go home?

CAROLINE I naturally don't want to be a wreck next day

DR CORNISH Were you a wreck next day fifteen years ago?

CAROLINE I used to be able to sleep till twelve o'clock next morning

DR. CORNISH And now you can't? I know At whatever time you go to bed you awake about eight, don't you? One does, you know, as one grows older

CAROLINE I'm beginning to feel a hundred

DR. CORNISH You mustn't take it too hardly Things haven't gone very far yet

CAROLINE [*Ironically*] Thank you so much

DR. CORNISH Perhaps you've noticed one white hair on your head, and you've said to your friends I'm sure I shall be prematurely grey

CAROLINE Are you enjoying this, Dr. Cornish?

DR. CORNISH It's not so tragic as you think

CAROLINE Middle age?

DR. CORNISH It's true there are no remedies Rouge, dye, powder and pencil are not even palliatives, they merely emphasize the obvious

CAROLINE You have nothing to recommend but resignation?

DR. CORNISH I can offer comfort

CAROLINE [*Shaking her head*] No

DR. CORNISH Dear lady, it's the happy time of a man's life You have learnt your limitations They are like a pack of cards, with which the skilful conjuror can do a hundred tricks Passion no longer holds you enslaved You go your way and attach no more importance to the opinion of your fellows than is seemly You are sound in wind and limb and you are free Good heavens, when I was young I did things I didn't want to because other people did Now I do what I like I wear the clothes I fancy, and don't ask myself if they're the fashion. When I'm tired I go to bed When I'm bored I betake myself to my own counsel Believe me, middle age is very pleasant. A book, a glass of wine, and

Amaryllis sporting in the shade, while I—bask in the sun

CAROLINE Is it because I'm middle-aged that Robert no longer wants to marry me?

DR. CORNISH Not at all I was explaining why you no longer wanted to marry him

CAROLINE [*Taking a little mirror out of her bag and looking at herself in it*] I see myself no different from what I was yesterday or ten years ago

DR. CORNISH You're a very charming and a very fascinating woman

CAROLINE I was never beautiful At my best I was no more than pretty, but I've been quite content with that People have found me amusing

DR. CORNISH None more than I

CAROLINE I've never lacked admiration . . . It's been the breath of my nostrils, Dr. Cornish If all that is to go, what is there left? Charity and good works? You talk like a man. You talk like a fool You don't know what middle age is to a woman It's very hard It gives me such a pain in my heart [*She begins to cry a little* DR. CORNISH *watches her with not unkindly amusement*] You're not going to charge me for this, are you? That would be more than I could bear

DR. CORNISH On the contrary, I'm going to charge you double A doctor is only supposed to give drugs, but I've given you common sense [CAROLINE *gives a little cry*] What is the matter?

CAROLINE May your hair fall out in bushels, and all your teeth rattle from your palsied gums May your joints ache with rheumatism and your toes tingle with gout May you wheeze and snore like an overfed pug, and blow like a ridiculous grampus.

DR. CORNISH Mercy!

CAROLINE What a fool I am to let myself be harassed by you We're nothing in ourselves We're what other people think we are I've just thought of Rex

DR CORNISH Who the dickens is Rex?

CAROLINE Rex is passion and youth and love To him, at all events, I'm young and charming He loves me

DR CORNISH Ho, ho!

CAROLINE [*Going to the telephone*] Mayfair 2315 Rex? D'you know who it is? [*She makes her voice as seductive as she knows how*] What are you doing? Idle creature Under the circumstances Under what circumstances? Would you like to come and dine with me to-night? [*Her face changes*] Engaged? You've never been engaged before when I've asked you Can't you break the engagement? Oh, of course, if there's any difficulty you mustn't think of it Anyhow, come round and see me now, we'll drink a dish of tea together Very well [*She puts down the receiver*] He's coming at once

DR CORNISH What are you going to do?

CAROLINE I? Oh, I'm going to tell him that I've refused Robert

DR CORNISH And then?

CAROLINE [*Smiling*] Then we'll see

[She draws a long, triumphant breath It is obvious that she expects the young man then to fling his passionate heart at her feet]

DR CORNISH My advice to you is to marry Robert Oldham

CAROLINE He doesn't want to marry me.

DR CORNISH Nag him a little

CAROLINE Why should I marry him? He's not young I don't believe we're suited to one another

DR CORNISH You try You'll find you'll jog along quite comfortably

CAROLINE Good heavens, I don't want to jog along I want poetry, passion, romance

DR CORNISH [*Soothingly*] Yes I think I'll write you a little prescription I dare say a gentle sedative will do you no harm

CAROLINE [*As he prepares to sit down*] You can write as many prescriptions as you like, but if you think I'm going to take your beastly medicine you're very much mistaken

DR CORNISH [*Writing*] Human emotion is a queer business Has it ever struck you that with a few grains of one drug you can make the timid heroic, and with a few grams of another the romantic, matter-of-fact You can make the *femme incomprise* satisfied with her lot and the adventurer content to stick to his desk You have read that the history of the world would have been different if Cleopatra's nose had been longer My dear, I have no doubt that if Cleopatra had been treated with valerian and massage she would never have made such a fool of herself at the Battle of Actium, and I'm convinced that with the administration of a certain amount of strychnine and iron I could have persuaded Antony that it wasn't worth while to lose an empire for her sake Take this three times a day after meals You'll find it'll do you a lot of good

CAROLINE I don't want to be done good to

[COOPER comes in]

COOPER Mrs Trench has called, ma'am

CAROLINE I'm not at home, Cooper

COOPER I said you were not at home, ma'am, but Mrs. Trench says you telephoned for her to come at once.

CAROLINE IP I did no such thing

COOPER. What shall I say, ma'am?

CAROLINE I suppose she must come up

COOPER Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit*

DR CORNISH Well, good-bye, dear lady.

CAROLINE I'm twenty-five, Dr Cornish Romance is on the way to my door in a two-seater

DR CORNISH Send it away, and let common sense come trundling along in a four-wheeler

CAROLINE Never Good-bye

[*DR CORNISH goes out In a moment ISABELLA comes in with MAUDE FULTON*

CAROLINE I'm delighted to see you, Isabella, but I can't make out what you mean by saying I telephoned

MAUDE I telephoned

CAROLINE You!

MAUDE I think it's absurd that you should refuse Robert Oldham I sent for Isabella so that we might talk it over

CAROLINE May I ask what business it is of Isabella's?

ISABELLA My dear, when your friends see you about to make a terrible mistake, they wouldn't be friends if they didn't do everything they could to save you from it

CAROLINE I take it that you've talked the matter out downstairs

MAUDE I put the case before Isabella as I saw it

ISABELLA I can hardly believe it even now It's the most astounding thing I've ever heard in my life

CAROLINE I hope you've had a pleasant chat Now I will ask you both to go away I'm going to lie down

MAUDE [*Sitting down firmly*] No, Caroline, we will not go till you've heard what we have to say

ISABELLA There must be some misunderstanding It only requires a little good-will and everything can be put right

CAROLINE Robert and I understand one another only too well

ISABELLA I wonder if you haven't known him so long that you've ceased to realize what a very attractive man he is

CAROLINE [*A little surprised*] Do you find him so?

ISABELLA He's one of the most charming men I've ever met

CAROLINE Oh!

ISABELLA He's very handsome He has charming eyes

CAROLINE Ah! That's just what he says about you

ISABELLA [*Pleased*] Really? Do tell me what he says

CAROLINE What a pity you can't marry him yourself, Isabella!

ISABELLA Oh, I! He's never had eyes for anybody when you've been there

CAROLINE Not till to-day But then I'm not always there, am I?

ISABELLA What do you mean, Caroline? You're speaking quite acidly

CAROLINE Oh, nothing

MAUDE All that is neither here nor there You can't afford to refuse Robert You've been a good deal talked about in connection with Robert Oldham, but your friends have been exceedingly sympathetic owing to the peculiar circumstances But honestly you owe it to them just as much as to yourself to marry the man as soon as you can

CAROLINE I'm going to marry to please myself, not to please my friends

MAUDE Besides, it's high time you settled down

CAROLINE Upon my word, I don't know why

MAUDE. You're no chicken, Caroline.

CAROLINE At all events, I'm younger than you darling

MAUDE A widow is as old as her possible husband, a spinster is as young as her latest young man

CAROLINE Then if I choose a husband at all I'll choose one younger than Robert

ISABELLA My dear, he's a perfect age Everyone knows that young men think of nothing but themselves It's the man of forty-five who makes much of you

MAUDE Dear Caroline, I think the time has arrived to be frank

CAROLINE Good heavens, haven't you been frank hitherto?

MAUDE I've been doing my best to spare your feelings

CAROLINE I hadn't noticed it

MAUDE I'm afraid I shall have to make myself a little unpleasant

CAROLINE For my good or for your own satisfaction?

MAUDE By a merciful interposition of providence in these matters one can generally combine the two I feel it my duty to tell you the whole truth

CAROLINE Will it take very long?

MAUDE Why?

CAROLINE Only that I'm expecting Rex in a minute or two, and I'm afraid I must ask you to leave me when he comes

MAUDE That's a very strange request

CAROLINE He has asked to see me alone

MAUDE What does he want?

CAROLINE I'm sure I don't know I'm filled with curiosity

MAUDE I won't conceal from you that I'm surprised, Caroline

CAROLINE Are you?

MAUDE Yes, you see, I told him you were engaged to Robert Oldham.

CAROLINE [*Indignantly*] You didn't How dare you! Really, Maude, you take too much upon yourself It's monstrous I will not let you interfere with my affairs in this way It's too monstrous

MAUDE Well, I thought you would be And what's more, you ought to be

CAROLINE I'll never forgive you How dare you? How dare you?

ISABELLA [*At the window*] Here he is.

CAROLINE Rex?

ISABELLA He's just driven up

MAUDE I'm not going, Caroline We must thrash this matter out thoroughly While Rex is here Isabella and I will have a cup of tea in your boudoir

CAROLINE [*Ironically*] Make yourselves at home, won't you?

MAUDE Come, Isabella

CAROLINE [*Furiously*] If you'd like an egg to your tea, mind you order it

[*The two ladies go out CAROLINE hurriedly looks at herself in the glass, arranges her hair a little, powders her nose, and settles herself down in a becoming attitude with a book She is careful to arrange her skirt so that it shall make a graceful line COOPER shows in*
REX CUNNINGHAM

COOPER Mr Cunningham

[*Exit.*

CAROLINE [*Very affably*] How nice of you to come.

REX I thought I was never going to see you again

CAROLINE Good heavens, why?

REX [*With a shrug of the shoulders*] Let me congratulate you on your engagement

CAROLINE D'you mean that my engagement entails the breaking of our friendship?

REX Don't you know how I've felt for you ever since I knew you? D'you think I have no heart?

CAROLINE No, I don't think that You are romance, youth, passion

REX I could bear to think of you as the wife of a man I'd never seen He was far away, and I knew you didn't care for him But now it's quite different

CAROLINE You've known always that I was deeply attached to Robert

REX If you knew how I've suffered

CAROLINE Don't, Rex, you break my heart

REX And I shall go on suffering I know myself I know what tortures I'm capable of I've got that nature But what must be, must be The only thing is, I beseech you not to ask me to go on seeing you

CAROLINE But I'm very fond of you

REX You say that because you have a kind heart You'll be happy with the man you love I shall only be in the way Say good-bye to me and let me go I'm seeing you now for the last time I shall never get over it My life is blighted But at all events let me spare you the sight of my torment Let me suffer in silence and in solitude

CAROLINE What would you say if I told you that I'd refused to marry Robert Oldham?

REX You? But Miss Fulton told me you were engaged

CAROLINE She was mistaken

REX [*Looking at her blankly*] My hat!

CAROLINE [*A little surprised*] Aren't you pleased?

REX Why did you refuse him?

CAROLINE I suppose because I didn't love him enough

REX Are you quite sure you're wise?

CAROLINE I beg your pardon? I didn't expect you to ask me that question!

REX I'm thinking of your happiness

CAROLINE It may be that my happiness lies elsewhere

REX [*Not without embarrassment*] After all, you've known Robert Oldham a great many years, haven't you?

CAROLINE Not so many as all that

REX He's a very good chap None better He's by way of being distinguished too I always feel rather insignificant beside him

CAROLINE One might almost think you wanted me to marry him

REX It would break my heart You know that.

CAROLINE But——

REX Looking at it entirely from your point of view I can't help seeing it would be the best thing

CAROLINE It's nice of you to be so anxious for my welfare

REX That has been my first thought ever since I first saw you

CAROLINE It's rare to find such unselfishness in a man

REX I'm so accustomed to being absolutely wretched

CAROLINE [*With a flash of insight*] Are you sure you don't rather like it?

REX I? Do you know how many sleepless nights I've spent on your account?

CAROLINE And I felt so sorry for you, poor dear Tell me, has nobody ever been in love with you?

REX I suppose so But, I don't know why, it's always bored me stiff

CAROLINE I'm beginning to see daylight You thrive on hopeless passion, my poor friend

REX I don't know what you mean If you think that I haven't been perfectly sincere in all I've said to you——

CAROLINE [*Interrupting*] Oh, I'm sure you have But hasn't my greatest attraction been that I didn't return your love?

REX I never expected to hear *you* say such things to me,
Caroline

CAROLINE My dear, I don't blame you We're as we're
made You are the unhappy lover I was a donkey not
to see it before

REX You make me feel an awful fool, Caroline

CAROLINE Don't grudge me that little bit of satisfaction
By the way, where are you dining to-night?

REX Isabella asked me to eat a chop with her

CAROLINE It crossed my mind that it might be she Dear
Isabella You'll like her so much as you get to know her
more She has a husband in India and she'll never do
anything to cause him any real uneasiness but she has a
very tender heart and an unlimited amount of sympathy

REX Caroline, you don't think for a moment——?

CAROLINE No, but I recommend it You see, now I've
discovered that nothing can distress you more than
to have your passion returned, I'm afraid I shan't
succeed in being as sympathetic as you have the right to
expect

REX You're unjust to me, Caroline It's not my fault if
I'm only really happy when I'm utterly miserable.

CAROLINE I'm so glad I'm not But it takes all sorts to make
a world

REX And you know, they never give me a chance They're
quite impossible

CAROLINE Who?

REX Women

CAROLINE They will fall on your neck, I suppose They're
affectionate creatures

REX They're always wanting to sacrifice themselves

CAROLINE I nearly did myself, Rex

REX They're so selfish They never will let a man be self-
sacrificing and all that sort of thing Why shouldn't a

man be an object of pity? I want to deny myself, I want to stand aside, I *can* suffer in silence I'm made like that

CAROLINE Not quite in silence, Rex But I'm keeping you, and I'm sure you have a hundred things to do Good-bye

REX No one will ever understand me Good-bye [*He goes to the door, opens it, and pauses a moment*] And you know, Caroline a woman *is* more desirable when she's unattainable

[*Exit*]

CAROLINE [*A sudden light dawning upon her*] A true word! [*Pause*] My hat!

[*MAUDE FULTON and ISABELLA TRENCH come in.*]

MAUDE We heard him go

CAROLINE Heavens, I'd forgotten all about you [*To ISABELLA*] Well, my dear, you've not been wasting your time with Rex, have you? *He* thinks you have charming blue eyes too

ISABELLA Caroline, what do you mean?

CAROLINE It appears he's dining with you to-night

ISABELLA I merely asked him because he seemed unhappy.

CAROLINE Unhappy? Why, he enjoys being unhappy I give him to you, Isabella, since you want him

ISABELLA [*Outraged*] Oh!

CAROLINE You'll just suit him You'll listen to all his protestations of affection, and you'll weep little salt tears of sympathy when he tells you he adores you And you'll give him to understand that your husband doesn't appreciate you And you'll be dreadfully sorry for him And I can trust you not to go an inch further than is quite safe You mustn't do that because it'll put him out dreadfully The last thing he wants is to have his feelings reciprocated.

ISABELLA [*Beginning to cry*] I never thought you'd say such things to me

MAUDE Caroline, you've asked him to marry you and he's refused

CAROLINE Oh, I haven't Really that's too much I've never been so insulted [*She begins to cry also*] Oh, I hate you, Maude, I hate you!

MAUDE Caroline!

CAROLINE You're a spiteful, envious cat

MAUDE You've got no right to say such things to me I've only aimed at your good

[*She begins to cry They all three sob angrily for a minute, then all three take their bags and pull out their mirrors*]

ISABELLA Oh, my dear, what a fright I look

CAROLINE Good heavens! I look a perfect sight

MAUDE Crying doesn't suit me one bit

[*These three speeches are said together, then all three take their puffs and powder their noses While they are busily engaged COOPER comes in*]

COOPER Mr Oldham has called, ma'am

CAROLINE Not at home

COOPER He said he'd come by appointment, ma'am

MAUDE That's quite right Show him up, Cooper

COOPER Very good, miss

[*Exit*]

CAROLINE What d'you mean, Maude?

MAUDE I sent for him

CAROLINE Abominable woman! I'm speechless! Maude, you abominable woman!

MAUDE I don't care if you're angry The matter can't be left like this, and something's got to be done

CAROLINE [*Making for the door*] I won't see him

MAUDE But he's here now

CAROLINE Get rid of him, then You think he's charming,
Isabella, take him too

ISABELLA He'll never go without seeing you.

CAROLINE Then I'll tell you why I refused him—because he
didn't want to marry me I saw his heart sink as the
words were wrung out of him by his sense of decency
He asked me only because he felt he must

MAUDE Oh, what nonsense! I oughtn't to have left you
alone You're a pair of children I dare say he was a little
nervous, and I'm sure you were

CAROLINE There's no doubt that he was If you'd seen the
amount of whisky he took! Dutch courage to propose
to me! Are you going to ask him now to marry me out of
pity! I dare say he's already got a ticket for the South Sea
Islands in his pocket

ISABELLA Everyone knows that Robert has worshipped the
ground you trod on for ten years It's incredible that
now, when he can at last achieve his greatest wish, he
shouldn't want to

CAROLINE You idiot, Isabella, don't you know that the only
thing men want is the unattainable?

MAUDE I suppose you're quite sure that he did propose?

CAROLINE You may be quite certain that I wouldn't have let
him out of the room before he did I have my self-
respect to think of

MAUDE Perhaps you didn't make yourself alluring enough

CAROLINE I made myself as alluring as I knew how

MAUDE You should have waited till the evening A good
dinner and a bottle of champagne have a wonderful
effect on the masculine heart

ISABELLA And no woman is so attractive that she's not
improved by shaded lights and an evening frock.

CAROLINE I didn't want him to come this morning You did it I knew very well that no man feels like marriage before luncheon

MAUDE I thought Robert was an exceptional man

CAROLINE No man's an exceptional man You must know that by now

ISABELLA What is he doing all this time?

CAROLINE Making up his mind to face the music I won't come out of my room till he's gone

[She flings out of the room The two ladies are left astounded]

MAUDE Well!

ISABELLA Dear Caroline is rather hard sometimes She should show more tenderness

[COOPER ushers in ROBERT OLDHAM and then goes out]

COOPER Mr Oldham

ROBERT I just asked Cooper to give me a drink Is Caroline not here? Good afternoon *[Silence]* Is anything the matter? When I came out of court my clerk gave me a message that I was to come at once on a matter of the greatest importance

MAUDE I sent the message I'm not pleased with you, Robert

ROBERT How changeable you are It's only a few hours ago since you insisted on kissing me

MAUDE This is no time for flippancy

ROBERT My dear Maude, if conscience took a human shape, I am convinced she would take yours Believe me, nothing is further from me than flippancy

MAUDE Then your conscience is troubling you.

ROBERT I never said so It's perfectly at ease.

MAUDE In that case your remark was senseless

ROBERT [*Desperately*] Oh, heavens! I was only trying to be funny

MAUDE I should have thought you knew enough about cross-examination to realize that it was an extremely damaging admission

ROBERT Good God, woman, don't bully me What is the matter?

MAUDE [*Impressively*] What have you done to Caroline?

ROBERT I? I don't understand what you mean?

MAUDE When we came here, Isabella and I, to congratulate her, we found Caroline in a state of complete collapse Isn't that so, Isabella?

ISABELLA [*A little doubtfully*] Yes, Maude

MAUDE She was crying her eyes out Her maid told us that she'd had one fainting fit after another The *sal volatile* bottle was empty Isn't that so, Isabella?

ISABELLA [*Very uncomfortably*] Yes, Maude

MAUDE We had to send for the doctor. He says her condition is most alarming, and it'll be a miracle if she escapes brain fever

ROBERT Good God!

MAUDE I repeat, what have you done to Caroline?

ROBERT Nothing I asked her to marry me

MAUDE Ah! That confirms Caroline's statement, Isabella And she refused Weren't you a little surprised?

ROBERT My dear Maude, surprised isn't the word I was staggered I'm reeling under the blow still

MAUDE It must have seemed incomprehensible

ROBERT Imagine For ten years I've longed for the moment when I might be able to ask her to be my wife It has been my dearest hope There was nothing in the world I wanted more She shatters all my expectations at a blow At the moment it seems to me that I have

nothing left to live for I suppose I shall get over it in time, but .

MAUDE Why don't you ask her again?

ROBERT She made me understand that her decision was quite irrevocable And, after all, my pride is deeply hurt I cannot expose myself a second time to so monstrous a humiliation

MAUDE Fiddle!

ROBERT Really, Maude, I think you might show me some sympathy in the bitterest disappointment of my life

MAUDE My dear friend, Caroline refused you because you showed her very plainly that you didn't want to marry her

ROBERT Oh, what nonsense! Everyone knows I wanted to marry her

MAUDE You asked her as though it was a duty you owed her A woman of spirit would naturally refuse I would have refused you myself

ROBERT Isabella, everyone knows Maude is a terrible liar Tell me, is there a word of truth in what she says?

ISABELLA Perhaps you didn't quite realize that a woman doesn't like these things arranged in too matter-of-fact a way You should have made love to her I'm sure you do it very well

ROBERT [*Sitting down beside her*] What makes you think that?

ISABELLA That is the sort of thing that every woman knows

ROBERT What intuition you have, Isabella

ISABELLA [*Putting her hand on his*] I know you love her, Robert

ROBERT [*Taking her hand*] I'm devoted to her

ISABELLA Let a charming story have a charming end

ROBERT I wonder if she really cares for me, Isabella

ISABELLA Oh, how can you doubt it? Women are faithful creatures, Robert

ROBERT Fidelity is not the characteristic which I have found most conspicuous in them in my practice at the Bar

ISABELLA D'you know that Caroline is jealous of you?

ROBERT Oh, come, what makes you think that?

ISABELLA She's furious with me Of course, I know she's not quite herself to-day, but she's been unkind to me It appears that you told her I had charming blue eyes

ROBERT So you have

ISABELLA You ought to have said it to me I should have understood I'm afraid she took it amiss

ROBERT You would understand anything

ISABELLA I suppose I have a natural gift of sympathy Of course, Caroline is charming, but she *is* a little lacking in tenderness sometimes, don't you think so?

ROBERT That is your most exquisite trait

MAUDE Really, Isabella, I don't know what you think you're doing

ISABELLA [*With some asperity*] My dear, I wish you'd let me do things in my own way

MAUDE I can't see that anything you've said for the last five minutes will make it any clearer to Robert that it is his duty to marry Caroline

ROBERT Duty! Stern daughter of the voice of God

MAUDE You've compromised her You've got her talked about There's only one course open to you You owe it to yourself and you owe it to her And you owe it to us.

ROBERT Oh, really Do you think so?

MAUDE We can't be deprived now of the satisfaction of seeing you both happy You've behaved like a gentleman

hitherto, I recommend you to play the rôle with elegance to the end

ROBERT [*He thinks it over for a moment He makes up his mind*] I'll see Caroline

MAUDE We will leave you Come, Isabella We have done our duty, and the saints in heaven can do no more

ISABELLA Good-bye

[*He opens the door for them and they go out He rings the bell He walks up and down moodily once or twice, but then braces himself, he is an Englishman, and fears no foe COOPER comes in*

ROBERT Will you ask Mrs Ashley if I could see her for a few minutes?

COOPER Mrs Ashley is engaged, sir

ROBERT I'll wait till she is free

COOPER Very good, sir [*Exit COOPER In a moment she comes in again*] Mrs Ashley is ill, sir, and unable to see anyone

ROBERT I'll wait till she's well

COOPER Very good, sir [*She goes out and in a moment more comes back*] Mrs Ashley is dead, sir

ROBERT I'll wait till she comes to life This is the day of judgment, and the last trump is sounding loud and long

COOPER Very good, sir

[*Exit This brings CAROLINE*

CAROLINE Have they gone?

ROBERT Thank God!

CAROLINE [*Calling*] Cooper

COOPER [*Coming in*] Yes, ma'am?

CAROLINE Put the chain on the door and don't let anyone in, or I'll give you your notice

COOPER Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit*

CAROLINE Your message was so pathetic that I had to come, Robert

ROBERT Look here, Caroline, you behaved very badly in putting all the blame on me You didn't so very much want to marry me, did you?

CAROLINE [*Smiling*] Not so very much.

ROBERT Then what's all this nonsense about floods of tears and fainting fits?

CAROLINE Who told you that?

ROBERT Maude She said you were in a state of collapse, and would only escape brain fever by a miracle

CAROLINE [*Chuckling*] You didn't believe it?

ROBERT No But I thought you might be up to some monkey trick

CAROLINE I bore the blasting of all my hopes with complete fortitude, Robert

ROBERT Well, now look here, Caroline, it's no good kicking against the pricks We've got to marry

CAROLINE [*Energetically*] I'm hanged if we do

ROBERT You know, this is only the beginning We shall be left no peace Sooner or later we shall be driven to it We may just as well resign ourselves and bow to the inevitable

CAROLINE If I marry it'll be because I want to, not to please my friends

ROBERT My dear, I have a large experience of the reasons for which two people marry They marry from pique, or loneliness, or fear, for money, position, or boredom, because they can't get out of it, or because their friends think it'll be a good thing, because no one has ever asked them before, or because they're afraid of being left on the shelf, but the one reason which infallibly leads to disaster is when they marry because they want to.

CAROLINE You're only saying that to reassure me.

ROBERT D'you think Maude and Isabella will give up the struggle? Never They'll be joined by all your friends, who'll think it very funny that you don't marry, and by all mine, who'll think there's a discreditable reason on my side, by your uncles and aunts, by my nephews and nieces My dear girl, we haven't a chance

CAROLINE I will fight to the last cartridge, Robert

ROBERT After all, I dare say we'll jog along well enough

CAROLINE [*Vehemently*] Jog along! jog along! jog along!
I don't want to jog along

ROBERT You know I'm devoted to you, Caroline

CAROLINE I'm devoted to you, Robert

ROBERT But I don't mind telling you now that at the first moment the thought of marriage frightened me out of my wits It meant changing all my habits and forming new ones It meant giving up my freedom. You don't mind my saying this, do you?

CAROLINE My dear, I didn't feel very differently myself

ROBERT It's not that I want to be a gay dog, but I want to be able to be a gay dog if I want to

CAROLINE I know Don't you know how you feel when you've been a long journey, and your train steams in at night to some strange city that you've never been in before All the lights are twinkling And a wonderful excitement seizes you, and you think any adventure may happen to you It never does, but it always may Oh, Robert, if you were sitting on the seat opposite me I'd know it never could

ROBERT It's no good, Caroline, we're the heroes of romance, you and I We've got to satisfy the human craving for a happy ending

CAROLINE I wish to heaven my husband had never died

ROBERT You know, Caroline, perhaps we shall feel quite differently about it when we *are* married

CAROLINE What makes you think that?

ROBERT I knew a man in South Africa who was engaged to a girl in England, and he wasn't able to send for her till they'd been engaged for seven years. He went to meet her at Durban, but just as the boat was coming in his courage failed him, and he turned and ran. She chased him to Cape Town. He fled to Johannesburg. She chased him to Port Elizabeth. He fled to Lorenzo-Marquez. My dear, she chased him up and down the Continent of Africa, and at last she cornered him. She married him out of hand, and ever since he's been the happiest man alive.

CAROLINE I'm not thinking of you, Robert, I'm thinking entirely of myself.

ROBERT My dear, in another hour Maude will be on your doorstep.

CAROLINE The chain is up.

ROBERT She'll bring a camp-stool and sandwiches.

CAROLINE Robert, this is intolerable! Is there nothing you can do?

ROBERT Good heavens, what can I do? I'm a desperate man.

CAROLINE I don't like to ask you to commit suicide.

ROBERT That's lucky, because I have no intention of doing so.

CAROLINE I suppose you wouldn't marry Maude?

ROBERT No. Certainly not!

CAROLINE Is there nothing you'll do for me?

ROBERT I'll marry you.

CAROLINE Pooh, you're doing that for yourself, not for me.

ROBERT It's no good quarrelling. We shall have plenty of time for that when we're married.

CAROLINE D'you know, we've never quarrelled once in all the time we've known one another.

ROBERT That augurs well for the future, at all events

CAROLINE Robert, I don't want to marry you

ROBERT Come, my dear, just a little courage I wouldn't press you if I saw a way out, but there isn't one.

CAROLINE Are you sure?

ROBERT Positive It's the only way

CAROLINE It's a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done before, Robert

ROBERT Then it's settled?

CAROLINE [*With a sigh*] It's settled

ROBERT We'd better get it over quickly, Caroline

CAROLINE I suppose nothing is gained by delaying.

ROBERT It's lucky I didn't resign from those clubs as I talked of doing

CAROLINE Why?

ROBERT Well, it was a mere extravagance, I never went near them, but I shall want them when I am married

CAROLINE I thought it was chiefly bachelors who used clubs

ROBERT Oh, no, bachelors don't mind staying at home

CAROLINE This will make a great change in your life, Robert

ROBERT I've always been very domestic I dare say it'll do me good to be shaken up a bit

CAROLINE You spent practically all your evenings here. I'm sure it won't hurt you to see a little more of other people

ROBERT We were getting into a groove, Caroline I dare say it wanted something like this to stir us up I look forward to the future with considerable pleasure

CAROLINE The past was very pleasant, Robert A *tête-à-tête* will never be the same thing again.

ROBERT You're thinking of the little suppers we used to have at the Savoy after the play They were jolly, weren't they?

CAROLINE And you know, Robert, I never lost the little thrill it gave me to come and dine with you in your house They were harmless little dinners enough, but there was always a sense of adventure when I took off my cloak in your hall

ROBERT By the way, what are you going to do about getting rid of your house?

CAROLINE [*Astounded*] I'm not going to get rid of my house

ROBERT My dear, we don't want two

CAROLINE Of course not I naturally supposed you'd sell yours

ROBERT Why? I've had my house for twenty years I'm very much attached to it You've only got a lease

CAROLINE That's got nothing to do with it I've just had it redecorated I've spent a fortune on my bathroom

ROBERT You're not going to ask me to have my bath in a futurist bathroom I never feel my best before breakfast as it is

CAROLINE I'm sorry you don't like my bathroom. But that's a matter of taste

ROBERT Personally, I don't see what anyone can want more than plain white tiles It's clean, sanitary and cheerful

CAROLINE [*Beginning to be vexed*] Oh, of course you always think your own things are better than anybody else's. Your bathroom is just like a tube station I really can't see myself having my bath in it I should be afraid all the time that a young man was going to pop in and say Next station—Marble Arch!

ROBERT My dear child, you must be sensible It's perfectly obvious that my house is a much nicer one than yours

CAROLINE [*Sharply*] I don't agree with you at all

ROBERT [*Impatiently*] Of course, if you won't listen to reason, there's nothing more to be said

CAROLINE I tell you frankly that nothing will induce me to leave this house

ROBERT Really, this is sheer obstinacy There's no room for me here There's not even a room that I can make into a study

CAROLINE Oh, yes, there is There's that very nice little room behind the dining-room

ROBERT [*Indignantly*] It looks out on a blank wall

CAROLINE That's just why I thought it would do so well for a study There'll be nothing to distract your thoughts

ROBERT You've told me a hundred times you could do nothing with it—it was like an ice-box in winter and like a furnace in summer Really, if you have no more affection for me than that

CAROLINE It isn't a matter of affection, it's a matter of commonsense Your house is very nice for a bachelor

ROBERT [*Interrupting*] Thank you

CAROLINE But it's quite unsuitable for a woman There are no cupboards

ROBERT Now you're *making* difficulties, Caroline Cupboards can be built

CAROLINE And which room have you settled for my boudoir? The coal-cellar? It's preposterous

ROBERT [*With temper*] I'm not going to argue the matter, Caroline I've made up my mind and there's an end of it

CAROLINE [*Quite decidedly*] I happen to have made up my mind too

ROBERT When I was waiting for you just now I decided exactly how to arrange matters You shall have the best bedroom, of course

CAROLINE It hasn't any sun, I know it

ROBERT [*With dignity*] It is the room that my poor Aunt Charlotte died in, Caroline

CAROLINE That doesn't make it any pleasanter for me to live in

ROBERT My dear Caroline, I cannot understand your attitude

CAROLINE It's quite simple I'm pleased with my house and I'm going to stick to it

ROBERT It's fortunate that I'm the most patient man in the world It's obvious that a woman comes to her husband's house

CAROLINE I don't see why at all

ROBERT My dear, it's one of the best-established customs of the human race We have Biblical authority for it A woman is enjoined to forsake all and follow her husband

CAROLINE You don't know what you're talking about Before you quote the Bible I recommend you to read it

ROBERT [*Fuming*] Really, Caroline, I must protest against the tone you're taking up I am discussing the matter in the most friendly spirit

CAROLINE [*Furious*] Surely you're not going to accuse me of being acrimonious You said just now we'd never quarrelled Believe me, it isn't because you haven't given me abundant provocation

ROBERT I think we'll resume the conversation when you're a little calmer, Caroline You'll only say things now which you'll regret later

CAROLINE Don't think for an instant you can impress me by being patronizing, Robert I have no wish to resume the conversation I've already said all I had to say.

ROBERT The great thing is that we should clearly understand one another I am prepared to gratify all your whims, however unreasonable they may be, and heaven knows, for the most part they're unreasonable enough, but this is a matter of principle I mean to begin as I mean to go on I wish you to put this house in the agent's hands at once

CAROLINE I shall do nothing of the sort

ROBERT Caroline, I have put my request in the most courteous and obliging way possible, but I do not expect it to be disregarded

CAROLINE I presume you are talking for your own entertainment, you're certainly not talking for mine

ROBERT Let me make myself quite clear, Caroline I refuse to come and live in this house

CAROLINE That is unfortunate, because nothing will induce me to come and live in yours

ROBERT Perhaps you'd like to think the matter over

CAROLINE No, thank you I've quite made up my mind If you want to marry me you must come and live here

ROBERT I will not marry you unless you consent to live in my house

CAROLINE Very well That settles it

ROBERT Take care, Caroline I've proposed twice now I shall not propose a third time

CAROLINE I wouldn't marry you now if you crawled on your bended knees from the Tower of London to Buckingham Palace

ROBERT In that case the marriage is off, Caroline

CAROLINE I was willing to sacrifice myself, but it's a little too much to expect that all the sacrificing should be on my side

ROBERT Sacrifice, you call it I was marrying you out of pure good nature.

CAROLINE Good heavens, what an escape I've had! I might have been chained to you for life

ROBERT It shows what women are Even the ablest men are children in their hands I've known you ten years, Caroline, and this is the first time you've shown yourself in your true colours

CAROLINE I've always known that you were selfish, vain and dyspeptic, but I shut my eyes to it I've been punished I didn't like you the first time I saw you It's always a mistake not to trust to first impressions

ROBERT In that case, I'm surprised that you threw yourself at my head in the way you did

CAROLINE Thank heaven, my eyes are opened at last! And as to throwing myself at your head, I would never have looked at you if you hadn't pestered me with your attentions

ROBERT [*Ironically*] I suppose you were sorry for me?

CAROLINE No, but I knew you were *safe* And I can't imagine anything more ridiculous in a man than that

ROBERT [*Boiling*] Oh! oh! I will never speak to you again, Caroline

CAROLINE You don't think I wish to continue our acquaintance, do you?

ROBERT Have you anything more to say to me?

CAROLINE Only this Perhaps you'd like to meditate over it If you were the only man in the world I wouldn't marry you

ROBERT Caroline, I can truthfully say that if I had to choose between the altar and the scaffold I would undoubtedly choose the scaffold Good-bye

CAROLINE. Good riddance! [*He is going to the door Suddenly the telephone bell rings They both give a gasp They look at one another in dismay The bell rings firmly*] It's Maude.

ROBERT Good God! I'd forgotten about her

CAROLINE What shall I do?

ROBERT I'm off, Caroline

CAROLINE You coward! You can't leave me like that

ROBERT Well, you'd better answer it

CAROLINE You answer it, Robert You're a man.

ROBERT I daren't, Caroline

[Meanwhile the bell rings persistently, angrily]

CAROLINE For goodness' sake, stop it ringing!

ROBERT It'll never stop till you answer

CAROLINE I wish to heaven I'd never had the telephone put
in

ROBERT I always disliked Maude

CAROLINE She's a detestable woman!

ROBERT I can't imagine why you ever put up with her

CAROLINE I hate her, I hate her! *[Desperately]* For goodness' sake, stop that ringing!

ROBERT Take the receiver off

CAROLINE You take it off, Robert

ROBERT Caroline

CAROLINE Oh, Robert, if you've ever loved me

ROBERT I'll do it

[He creeps towards the table as though it were a beast that might bite, he stalks it carefully, stealthily, then with a sudden bound leaps on to the telephone and snatches the receiver off CAROLINE gives a shriek He bounds back and they are close together She clings to him They tremble with fear]

ROBERT I've done it

CAROLINE Don't leave me, Robert

ROBERT No, I won't leave you

CAROLINE Oh, Robert, I shall never forget this

ROBERT She thinks we're listening She's talking at her end
now I expect she's getting angry She's making a
scene

CAROLINE Oh, Robert, I wonder what she's saying.

ROBERT Can't you guess?

CAROLINE Thank God, the chain is on the door! She'll be
round in ten minutes

[They look at one another in dismay]

ROBERT It's no good, Caroline We've got to get married

CAROLINE I know But what is to be done? You must
think of some way out, Robert

ROBERT There's only one We must give up both houses
and take a new one

CAROLINE But I like my house, Robert

ROBERT I like mine

CAROLINE It'll be a wrench for both of us That's some
comfort

ROBERT Our first sacrifice on the altar of connubial bliss

CAROLINE You'll let me decorate the new house, Robert

ROBERT All except the bathroom Give me that as a
wedding-present

CAROLINE I tell you what, we'll each have a bathroom.
You can have yours like a tube station

ROBERT And you shall have one like an attack of gastritis

CAROLINE *[With a sigh]* If it's got to be done it had better
be done at once I'll ring up the house agent

[She takes up the telephone-book and looks out an address]

ROBERT Shall we be married by special licence?

CAROLINE I haven't an idea

ROBERT I think I'll just go round to the club Petersen is
sure to be there, and he's had a lot of experience in these
matters There's no reason why I shouldn't ask him
that

CAROLINE Oh, how did the divorce go?

ROBERT First rate I think it'll last for four or five days
Neither of them will have a shred of reputation by the
time it's over

CAROLINE [*At the telephone*] Mayfair 148 Are you Messrs
Gaskell and Birch? I want to let my house I can't
say it all on the telephone Will you send somebody
round No At once Where? Oh, Mrs Ashley,
Curzon Terrace, Regent's Park

[*She puts down the receiver*]

ROBERT Is there anything more you want to say to me? I'll
be back presently to tell you what I've found out

CAROLINE Before dinner?

ROBERT Oh, yes By the way, about dinner Don't you
think we need cheering up a bit? I'm afraid it would be
rather dull dining by ourselves

CAROLINE I think it would rather

ROBERT Why don't you ask Isabella?

CAROLINE Rex Cunningham is dining with her I might ask
him too, and we can play bridge

ROBERT Oh, yes, that'll be jolly [*CAROLINE takes out her
patience cards*] What are you going to do now?

CAROLINE Oh, I'll have a game of patience

ROBERT Yes, do It'll rest you

[*He goes towards the door*]

CAROLINE Robert

ROBERT Yes?

CAROLINE It's emeralds I like, you know

ROBERT I'm glad you reminded me

[*He goes out She begins to put out her patience cards*]

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

SCENE *The same It is ten minutes later*

[CAROLINE is finishing her game of patience COOPER shows in DR. CORNISH]

COOPER Dr. Cornish

[Exit

CAROLINE This is a joyful surprise I've torn up your prescription

DR. CORNISH How on earth do you expect a doctor to make a living if you won't take medicine! You'll remain perfectly well

CAROLINE You didn't talk like that just now

DR. CORNISH That was a visit This is a call.

CAROLINE I hesitate to ask his reason

DR. CORNISH You need not I was just going to tell you I'm devoured with curiosity

CAROLINE That isn't one of the failings that middle-age eradicates?

DR. CORNISH Tell me, which has won, romance or common-sense? Are you going to marry Robert Oldham or Rex Cunningham?

CAROLINE My dear doctor, Rex Cunningham is a mere boy

DR. CORNISH Oh, I've known those marriages turn out very well My last cook married the lad who came in to do the boots and knives, and they're very happy. At least I haven't heard anything to the contrary

CAROLINE I wonder how she worked it

DR. CORNISH The policy of nag, I believe.

CAROLINE I've promised to marry Robert Oldham

DR CORNISH Then it only remains for me to congratulate you

CAROLINE One comfort is that my friends will have to give me wedding-presents I get back on them that way, don't I?

DR CORNISH I'm sure you'll be very happy

CAROLINE [*Tartly*] I'm sure I shall be nothing of the sort

DR CORNISH Don't jump down my throat

CAROLINE You know I'm very fond of Robert I don't want to lose him

DR CORNISH Is that inevitable?

CAROLINE Haven't you noticed that other people's bread-and-butter is always much nicer than your own? Robert is like that He always prefers somebody else's fireside If I marry him, where is he going to spend his evenings?

DR CORNISH I only see one way out of it You must marry somebody else

CAROLINE I believe it's the only way I can keep Robert It's very hard if you come to think of it

DR CORNISH Especially on the innocent victim.

CAROLINE Whom d'you think I'd better marry?

DR CORNISH Let us examine your circle of friends and see who would meet your requirements

CAROLINE [*With a twinkle in her eye*] I don't think it ought to be anyone too young

DR CORNISH No, a man of a certain age

CAROLINE I rather like grey hair, don't you?

DR CORNISH A professional man, of course

CAROLINE Oh, yes, I'd like him to have interests in common with Robert

DR CORNISH He oughtn't to be a barrister It would be such a bore for you if they talked shop together.

CAROLINE I don't see why he shouldn't be a doctor

DR CORNISH Yes, I don't think that's a bad idea And of course if he had a pretty large practice it would keep him busy, wouldn't it?

CAROLINE Yes Now, there's only one thing more I think he ought to be a great friend of Roberts

DR CORNISH Obviously that would make matters much simpler Now, let us think I wonder who there is

CAROLINE Don't bother, Dr Cornish I've already made up my mind

DR CORNISH God bless my soul, you're very quick.

CAROLINE *You are going to marry me*

DR CORNISH [*With great decision*] No, I'm not

CAROLINE Now, my dear friend, don't be unreasonable You meet the requirements in a manner that I can only describe as miraculous

DR CORNISH My dear lady, let us put things in their places I am your medical attendant, not an aspirant to your hand

CAROLINE Oh, but you said just now that this was a call and not a visit

DR CORNISH We can easily settle that I will charge you half a guinea, and that makes it a visit

CAROLINE I thought you were a man of the world

DR CORNISH If that means getting out of an awkward predicament gracefully, I flatter myself I am

CAROLINE No, it doesn't It means accepting the inevitable with elegance

DR CORNISH The inevitable is only what a fool has not the wit to avoid ✓

CAROLINE Believe me, when a woman really makes up her mind to marry a man nothing on God's earth can save him

DR CORNISH No one is more conscious than I of your advantages I am sure any man would be lucky to get you, but you know I'm very modest I don't deserve so much happiness

CAROLINE Your diffidence gives you a new charm in my eyes It shall be the object of my life to prove you mistaken

DR CORNISH I have too much affection for you to consent for an instant to your wasting your efforts on so unworthy an object

CAROLINE Ah, then you have an affection for me

DR CORNISH A purely medical affection, if I may so put it

CAROLINE Good heavens, it sounds like mumps

DR CORNISH You know, you should have had that prescription made up I told you you needed soothing

CAROLINE I find *you* soothing That's one of the reasons why I consent to marry you

DR CORNISH Don't let us lose sight of the point that I haven't asked you

CAROLINE Well, do

DR CORNISH You might accept me

CAROLINE I undoubtedly should

DR CORNISH Then I don't think I'll risk it.

CAROLINE You'd better It will only be embarrassing for both of us if I have to make the proposal

DR CORNISH I can always say no

CAROLINE Oh, but I wouldn't take a refusal

DR CORNISH You're a perfect monster of determination.

CAROLINE When I think of Robert's great affection for me, I'm prepared for anything

DR CORNISH I don't wish to seem brutal, but I really must tell you that in my heart of hearts I am completely indifferent to Robert's affection for you

CAROLINE I thought he was a great friend of yours

DR CORNISH He is

CAROLINE Then you must want to make him happy I'm sure he'd like you to be my husband

DR CORNISH You're putting me in a very embarrassing position

CAROLINE I wonder if you know how very pleasant it is to be married

DR CORNISH I'm sure it's delightful for those who like it

CAROLINE There are a hundred ways in which a woman can make a man comfortable

DR CORNISH There are a thousand and one in which she can do the reverse

CAROLINE I always think there's something rather cold and cheerless about a house that lacks a woman's touch

DR CORNISH How true! I feel quite sure that if you put that before Robert as persuasively as you have before me he will realize how very lucky he is to be going to marry you

CAROLINE Pray, don't be flippant *You* are going to marry me

DR CORNISH No

CAROLINE Yes

DR CORNISH [*With a smile*] After all, you can't force me.

CAROLINE I can make life intolerable to you unless you do.

DR CORNISH You're a very dangerous woman

CAROLINE But you're a very brave man

DR CORNISH I can't help thinking that Robert would look upon it as a very unfriendly action on my part

CAROLINE Only for a moment He'd soon realize that we'd only had his happiness in view

DR CORNISH If you find a husband so essential, why were you so careless as to lose your last?

CAROLINE I never knew what a useful article it was about a house

DR CORNISH It doesn't inspire confidence, you know

CAROLINE I'll be more careful with you

DR CORNISH [*With a chuckle*] It would be an awful sell for him, wouldn't it?

CAROLINE Can't you see his face when you tell him?

DR CORNISH [*Considering her*] Of course, you're a very charming woman.

CAROLINE People have thought so

DR CORNISH [*Impulsively*] I think Robert's a fool He should never have hesitated

CAROLINE He shouldn't have, should he?

DR CORNISH It would serve him jolly well right if someone stepped over his head and seized the opportunity that he hadn't the courage to take

CAROLINE I'd rather you spoke of me as a prize than as an opportunity That suggests a remnant at a sale

[*He gives her a long look There is a twinkle in his eye*]

DR CORNISH Caroline, will you be my wife?

CAROLINE I? [*For a moment she is surprised, but she quickly recovers herself*] I hardly know what to say to you This is so unexpected It never entered my head that you—that you cared for me [*She takes the plunge with determination*] Yes, I will be your wife

DR CORNISH I've always thought it would be very nice to have someone on whom I could experiment with new medicines when they're put on the market

CAROLINE [*Somewhat taken aback*] Oh! How have you managed up till now?

DR CORNISH [*Blandly*] I've generally tried them on the maids, but they have no interest in science, they will give me their notice But, of course, you couldn't do that, could you?

CAROLINE I haven't got a very great interest in science myself

DR. CORNISH Oh, but it'll come I'm sure you won't hesitate at a trifling inconvenience when you realize how much it means to me

CAROLINE [*Pursing her lips*] If there are any other duties which you expect of me, I hope you'll tell me at once

DR. CORNISH I don't know that there are Of course, you'll have to lead a very retired life People don't much like meeting their doctor's wife, they're always afraid she knows too much about their insides In fact, the most desirable thing is that she should be a confirmed invalid

CAROLINE I imagine that would follow almost automatically on a course of medicines whose properties you were entirely unfamiliar with

DR. CORNISH That is one of those admirable contrivances which confirm one in the belief that the world is not a matter of pure chance

CAROLINE [*Shaking off the doubts which his remarks have suggested*] Oh, well, I don't care When I think of the faces they'll all make when you tell them the news, everything is worth while

DR. CORNISH I see the joke from your point of view much more than from mine

CAROLINE Isabella will think it very touching and she'll probably kiss you

DR. CORNISH She's a very pretty young woman

CAROLINE Maude will think I've behaved abominably, and she'll tell me so with gusto But Robert—I wonder what Robert will look like I'm going to telephone to Isabella [*She touches the bell*] They've spent a happy day here to please themselves Now it's my turn.

DR. CORNISH Are you expecting Robert?

CAROLINE Yes Dear Robert He went to buy me a ring
[COOPER comes in] Cooper, ring up Mrs Trench and ask
her to come round at once I have something very
important to tell her

COOPER Very good, ma'am

Exit

CAROLINE Now listen Maude, if I know her, is on her way
to this house I'm only surprised that she hasn't come
already Robert can't be long Then there's Isabella
You mustn't say a word till they're all here Then—

DR CORNISH Yes, what then?

CAROLINE Then you'll stand here and you'll get into an
appropriate attitude You'll try and look merry and
bright, won't you?

DR CORNISH Oh, d'you think so? I should have thought
an air of stern resolution would be more to the point

CAROLINE Remember that you've loved me in secret for
seven years

DR CORNISH It's the seven which seems to me a little
difficult to indicate on my face

CAROLINE Then you'll say to them My dear friends, I have
a communication to impart which will be in the nature of
a surprise to all of you Caroline has consented to be my
wife And then we'll see what happens

DR CORNISH I see

CAROLINE What d'you think will happen?

[Enter COOPER, followed by Miss FULTON]

COOPER Miss Fulton.

[Exit]

MAUDE Well, Caroline Oh, how do you do again, Dr
Cornish? *[To CAROLINE]* Is anything the matter with you?

CAROLINE *[Mysteriously]* No Dr Cornish hasn't come to
see me about my health

DR CORNISH No

MAUDE Where is Robert?

CAROLINE He's gone out

MAUDE You haven't sent him away?

CAROLINE He did what you wished, Maude

MAUDE [*With triumph*] Ah I knew it only needed a little firmness and everything could be put right

CAROLINE Maude, something has happened which puts an entirely different complexion on things

MAUDE [*Suddenly suspicious*] What on earth do you mean?
Dr Cornish!

DR CORNISH All in good time, my dear lady

MAUDE Isn't everything all right?

CAROLINE It depends on what you mean by all right.

MAUDE My dear

CAROLINE You must wait till Robert comes It's only fair that nobody should know before he does [*To Dr Cornish*] Don't you agree with me?

DR CORNISH Perfectly

MAUDE By the way, have you had an answer to the telegram you sent to Nairobi?

CAROLINE No, I haven't yet

[*COOPER comes in to announce ROBERT OLDHAM and then goes out*]

COOPER Mr Oldham!

CAROLINE [*Cordially*] Ah, Robert, I've been wondering what had happened to you

ROBERT Good God, there's Maude.

CAROLINE And Dr Cornish

ROBERT Hullo! I've not seen you for a long time. What d'you think of the news?

CAROLINE Dr Cornish has some news, too, Robert.

MAUDE If I am not told it soon I shall have an attack of hysterics

ROBERT I've seen Petersen, Caroline

CAROLINE You shall tell me what he said later

ROBERT You're very strange, Caroline

CAROLINE You must have a moment's patience

MAUDE Why?

CAROLINE I want Isabella to be here She takes such an interest in me I feel that she, too, should know something that makes so great a difference to my future

ROBERT [*Somewhat irritably*] I don't understand I hate mysteries

DR CORNISH I have something to tell you which is very important, but Mrs Ashley does not wish me to break it to you till all her friends are gathered round her

CAROLINE Exactly

MAUDE I like mysteries, but I hate suspense

ROBERT Oh, Cornish, has Caroline told you what we've decided on?

DR CORNISH She's told me that you wish to marry her

ROBERT You know I've been devoted to her for years

CAROLINE We need not go into that now, Robert

MAUDE I'm beginning to grow very uneasy

[*Enter COOPER*

COOPER Mrs Trench and Mr Cunningham

[*They enter*

CAROLINE At last

ISABELLA What is the matter, Caroline? Fortunately Rex was at my door He was just going to take me for a drive in the Park

CAROLINE His two-seater is so useful, isn't it?

ISABELLA So I made him bring me here at once Has anything happened? Your message has made me dreadfully anxious

REX We're both dreadfully anxious, Caroline

CAROLINE What is it, Cooper?

COOPER There's a gentleman called He says he has an appointment with you, ma'am

CAROLINE [*Taking the card*] Gaskell and Birch Oh, I know, they're the house agents

ROBERT Of course You rang them up just before I left you Cooper can take him round the house

CAROLINE Thank the gentleman for coming, Cooper, and say I'm sorry to have troubled him. I shan't be wanting to let my house just yet after all

ROBERT [*Astounded*] Caroline!

CAROLINE That's all, Cooper

COOPER Very good, ma'am

[*Exit*

ROBERT What is the meaning of this? You agreed that you would get rid of your house If you've changed your mind, Caroline

CAROLINE Wait one moment, Robert Now, dear Doctor, I think the time has arrived Will you tell them—everything?

DR CORNISH [*Stepping forward*] Yes My dear friends, I have a communication to impart which will be in the nature of a surprise to all of you

ISABELLA I can simply hear my heart beating

DR CORNISH [*Looking steadily at CAROLINE*] Stephen Ashley walked out of this room exactly five minutes ago

ALL What?

[*No one is more taken aback than CAROLINE DR CORNISH watches her with extreme, but inward, entertainment*

DR CORNISH I have seen him with my own eyes He's no more dead than I am.

REX My hat!

ISABELLA I don't understand Caroline!

CAROLINE No one can be more flabbergasted than I

DR CORNISH It's not the first time his death has been announced When I came in and found him I was hardly surprised

CAROLINE I don't know if I'm standing on my head or on my heels

DR CORNISH He can very easily live for twenty years

CAROLINE D'you think he will?

DR CORNISH If proper care is taken of him

MAUDE My poor Caroline, what a disappointment for you

DR CORNISH You must all of you be very gentle with Caroline [*To CAROLINE*] I can only offer you my sincerest sympathy

CAROLINE You're not going?

DR CORNISH [*With a smile*] I'm going to leave you to deal with the situation as best you can

CAROLINE [*Under her breath*] You brute!

DR CORNISH If a man of the world is one who can get out of an awkward predicament gracefully Good-bye
[*He goes out quickly*]

ISABELLA You're bearing it magnificently

CAROLINE [*Trying not to laugh*] D'you think so? It's been an awful strain I've just about reached the end of my strength I think I'm going to faint

ISABELLA Robert, open the window You look a perfect wreck

CAROLINE [*Beginning to giggle*] No, I'm going to have a nerve storm

MAUDE Don't let yourself go, Caroline Don't let yourself go

CAROLINE [*Gurgling*] I can't help it

*[She starts laughing Her laughter grows louder and lower
They all press round her]*

ALL Caroline, Caroline

CAROLINE It was such a shock!

ISABELLA Where are my smelling salts?

MAUDE How stupid of me!

*[The two ladies hurriedly take salts from their bags and put
them under CAROLINE'S nose while she helplessly
laughs and laughs]*

MAUDE Here are some Slap her hands

[The two men take her hands and slap the palms]

ROBERT Stop it, Caroline, stop it!

ISABELLA Let's send for the doctor

MAUDE What's the good of a doctor? I know exactly what
to do Slap her feet

CAROLINE I won't have my feet slapped

MAUDE Don't pay any attention to what she says

*[While the men continue slapping her hands the ladies slap
her feet CAROLINE laughs uproariously At last she
is exhausted]*

CAROLINE Oh, dear!

MAUDE Now she's getting better I knew the best thing
was to slap her feet If that doesn't stop it, then the
thing is to wrap her in a rug and roll her up and down the
floor

CAROLINE Maude, you cat! Oh, I'm beginning to feel
better

ROBERT After all, one can't be surprised, can one?

MAUDE Good heavens, if my husband suddenly appeared
like that I should fall down in a fit

REX I didn't know you had a husband

MAUDE I haven't That's why it would be such a terrible
shock

ISABELLA Now you must tell us everything, Caroline

CAROLINE There's nothing to tell

MAUDE Nonsense How did he come in?

CAROLINE On his feet!

MAUDE Don't be silly What did he do? What did he say?
What is he up to? Where is he going?

CAROLINE Oh!

*[This is a long-drawn sound as she realises what she is in for
and what she must invent]*

ROBERT Don't worry her Hasn't she been through enough
already, poor child?

CAROLINE How good you are to me, Robert!

MAUDE It can't hurt you just to give us the bare facts,
Caroline

CAROLINE Sit down, then, and I will tell you all

*[They seat themselves on chairs, two on each side of her,
eager for a full account]*

ROBERT Now don't excite yourself, Caroline I beseech
you to be calm

MAUDE Hold your tongue, Robert

CAROLINE Well, I was sitting down quite calmly playing a
game of patience Robert had just left me

ROBERT On what an errand!

MAUDE I know You had arranged to be married I saw it
at once in Robert's look My poor Robert!

ROBERT *[Simply]* I had told Caroline I couldn't live without
her She promised to be mine

CAROLINE He went out to buy a ring I was wondering if it
would be a cabochon

ROBERT *[Gloomily]* Would you like to see?

[He takes out of his pocket a large emerald ring]

CAROLINE Oh, Robert, what a beauty! It looks frightfully
expensive.

ROBERT Oh, a mere song I wonder if they'll take it back

CAROLINE Don't bother about that, Robert. I will keep it as a memento of our short engagement

[ROBERT'S face falls]

ISABELLA What a charming idea, Caroline!

ROBERT [*With a hollow laugh*] There's no one like Caroline to have charming ideas like that

MAUDE Go on, Caroline

CAROLINE I only wanted a seven to get my patience out I drew a ten of clubs, a three of spades I don't believe I shall get it, I said Suddenly Cooper opened the door and said a gentleman wanted to see me

ALL Yes, yes!

[*They draw their chairs a little closer*]

CAROLINE I thought it was the house agent

ROBERT Of course You rang him up just before I left

CAROLINE Oh, Robert, I want to tell you that I thought it over It seemed cruel to make you sell your dear little house After all, a woman should cleave to her husband I had made up my mind to get rid of this one, and come and live in yours

ROBERT Caroline, were you ready to do that for me?

THE OTHERS Go on, Caroline

CAROLINE I didn't hesitate I said to Cooper Show the gentleman up I went on with my patience Ah, I said, there's the seven at last! I raised my eyes, and there was my husband standing before me

ALL Oh!

CAROLINE [*Dramatically*] You, I said Yes, he said Not dead? I said No, he said

MAUDE It's the most exciting thing I've ever heard in my life

ISABELLA What did you do then?

CAROLINE [*Deliberately*] I asked him to sit down

ROBERT That was splendid You always had presence of mind, Caroline I like that You asked him to sit down

CAROLINE I wanted to gain time I was all in a flutter

MAUDE Of course, I think it was monstrous of him to come here at all

CAROLINE He did it in kindness, Maude He saw the notice in *The Times* this morning, and he thought I might be anxious about him He said he felt the only thing to do was to come here himself and tell me the announcement was premature

ISABELLA But, then, what is the explanation of it?

CAROLINE The explanation? I'm just coming to that

ROBERT Really the papers ought to be more careful

MAUDE Go on, Caroline, we're simply hanging on your words

CAROLINE I'm not sure, but I think I'm going to have another nerve storm

MAUDE Get the hearthrug, Rex That'll just do to roll her up in

CAROLINE No, don't bother I think it's going off The explanation is perfectly simple Just give me a moment to collect my thoughts You know I'm quite dazed after all I've gone through to-day

ISABELLA Take your time, dearest

CAROLINE Well, I may as well confess to you now that poor Stephen has always been very wild It appears that he was in with a man called Brown, and they'd been connected in some deal or other which I'm afraid was dreadfully shady Of course, I didn't ask for details It's all rather vague in my mind

ROBERT That's only natural

MAUDE Oh, be quiet, Robert

CAROLINE They had a row, and Brown bolted with all Stephen's belongings, his papers, his kit, everything Then I don't know exactly what happened Brown seems to have been taken suddenly ill When he was brought to the hospital he was unconscious They found Stephen's papers on him and naturally concluded he was Stephen

MAUDE I see it all It's a thing that might happen to anybody

CAROLINE [*Eagerly*] Yes, isn't it? Stephen saw the announcement in this morning's Times He grasped the whole situation I don't think he's sorry the authorities in East Africa should believe him dead He's made up his mind to go to Texas Stephen Ashley is dead to everyone but me

MAUDE At all events, you've seen him for the last time,
Caroline That's something to be thankful for

CAROLINE I suppose so

ROBERT What do you mean by that? Aren't you sure of it?

CAROLINE There's one other thing I must tell you I hardly know how to say it He still loves me

REX Caroline

CAROLINE He asked me to go to Texas

ALL You!

CAROLINE He's going to start a new life He said I should give him confidence in himself He implored me to go with him

ROBERT But of course you refused, Caroline?

CAROLINE I was obliged to refuse Then he said that I would be an inspiration to him He would do everything in the world to make amends for the past He would make himself a new man, and then he would come back for me

ISABELLA It's really very beautiful

ROBERT And where do I come in?

CAROLINE I can never marry you, Robert

ROBERT Caroline, you fill me with anguish . I must be alone for a moment I don't want to be unmanly

[He gets up and walks slowly to the window He stands there struggling with his emotions REX is sunk in blank wretchedness]

MAUDE Well, Isabella, we did all we could We at all events have nothing to reproach ourselves with

ISABELLA Poor Robert My heart bleeds for him There's something singularly awe-inspiring in the sight of a strong man wrestling with his emotion

MAUDE It's not often that I confess myself beaten, but this time I really am at a loss Good-bye, Caroline I'll ring up this evening to see how you are

CAROLINE Good-bye, dearest I can never thank you enough for all you've done for me to-day

[They kiss, and Miss FULTON goes out]

ISABELLA I must leave you too, Caroline, but I'd just like to say a word or two to Robert before I go It's just at these times that a man values a woman's sympathy

CAROLINE Oh, do, Isabella I know what a heart you have
[ISABELLA goes up to ROBERT and puts her hand gently on his arm He heaves a sigh and gently pats her hand She looks up at him softly They step out on to the balcony CAROLINE and REX have watched the little comedy] At it again Dear Isabella, she's so sympathetic

REX *[Gloomily]* If there's anyone in want of sympathy now it's me

CAROLINE Is anything the matter?

REX Can you ask me that? Oh, Caroline everything is the matter I love you

CAROLINE Oh, you mustn't say that to me now, Rex—so loud

REX This changes everything

CAROLINE I suppose it does I never thought of it

REX You never thought of me at all Oh, Caroline, you must be quite heartless Has anyone ever loved you as unselfishly as I have?

CAROLINE Now that I have one man with a marriage certificate in his hand, so to speak, and another with a special licence in his pocket, it does make a difference, doesn't it?

REX My position is absolutely intolerable

CAROLINE [*With a sigh of self-satisfaction*] I am the unattainable

REX [*Absorbed in himself*] Oh, how I'm going to suffer I'm going to endure absolute agonies

CAROLINE [*In exactly the same condition*] I am young I am beautiful I am desired

REX You're not paying any attention to me I adore you, Caroline

CAROLINE [*Looking away modestly*] I can never love you, Rex

REX Are you quite, quite sure of that, Caroline?

CAROLINE Quite, quite

REX [*With a sigh of satisfaction*] My heart's never been so broken as this time It'll take me all my life to piece it together again You do believe in my love now, don't you?

CAROLINE Oh, yes A woman has such quick intuition I know that you love me

REX I shall pass sleepless night after sleepless night

CAROLINE I can hardly bear to think of it

REX And there's nothing you can do, is there?

CAROLINE Nothing

REX [*With immense enjoyment*] I'm simply going to have a rotten time

CAROLINE It's wonderful to be capable of such love

REX Yes, I'm like that I never knew anyone who could suffer as I can

CAROLINE It's only those who can who are worthy of a great love

REX Do you think it would be unmanly of me to cry?

CAROLINE I shouldn't like you to do it here

REX Oh, no I'll keep a stiff upper lip as long as I'm with you But to-morrow morning I shouldn't wonder at all if my pillow was sopping

CAROLINE Have you a waterproof sheet?

REX Yes I never travel without one

CAROLINE [*Giving him her hand*] I wish you could marry some nice pure young English girl

REX With a bit of money? I can never forget you, Caroline Why are you giving me your hand?

CAROLINE [*With emotion*] I thought you were going away

REX I can't leave you like this We must talk this over thoroughly I've got masses of things I want to say to you

CAROLINE Not now, Rex I'm shattered by all this emotion.

REX Well, when can I see you again?

CAROLINE I'm afraid I'm dreadfully full up this week

REX Caroline, have pity on me

CAROLINE Of course, if you hadn't been engaged to-night you might have come and dined here

REX But I'm not engaged to-night

CAROLINE I thought you were dining with Isabella.

REX I can dine with Isabella any night.

CAROLINE Won't she be hurt if you throw her over?

REX To tell you the truth, Caroline, I don't think I'm going to get on with Isabella

CAROLINE D'you find her too . . . too melting?

REX My dear Caroline, she's like butter on a hot day No, no, too many tears have been wept on that bosom, I'm not going to bedew it with mine

CAROLINE In that case dinner at eight sharp.

REX I'll come, Caroline if nothing unfortunate has happened to me before then

CAROLINE Oh, be careful, I've got quite a nice little dinner

REX [*Gloomily*] What have you got?

CAROLINE I've got some fresh caviare It's just arrived from Russia

REX I could eat nothing In happier moments I don't deny that I like caviare

CAROLINE And I've got a little turtle soup

REX I might try to swallow a little turtle soup

CAROLINE [*Softly*] Don't let anything happen before dinner

REX I suppose you haven't got grilled salmon?

CAROLINE No, turbot

REX [*Desperately*] Everything goes against me

CAROLINE On the other hand, I've got some dear little baby chickens just out of their shells It seems almost unkind to eat them when so young

REX I dare say they've been saved a lot of unhappiness

CAROLINE And then nothing but a strawberry ice

REX I shouldn't wonder if I could eat the ice.

CAROLINE Then you'll come?

REX [*With a deep sigh*] If it'll give you any pleasure. A dinner-jacket or a white tie?

CAROLINE A dinner-jacket

REX All right Good-bye I I can't say good-bye to the others I'm in such a fearful state of agitation

[Exit ISABELLA *bears the door close and comes back into the room*]

ISABELLA Has Rex gone? He was going to drive me home

CAROLINE How stupid of him! I suppose he forgot

ISABELLA I'll get a taxi I want to leave you alone with Robert He's dreadfully upset, Caroline

CAROLINE Is he?

ISABELLA I've been trying to console him a little

CAROLINE Yes, I saw you

ISABELLA Be very gentle with him, Caroline Be tender

CAROLINE I shall never find the exquisite things to say to him that you would, Isabella

ISABELLA He says I have a wonderful gift of sympathy

CAROLINE [*With a sigh*] I wonder if you'd come and dine with me to-night?

ISABELLA I'm afraid I've asked Rex

CAROLINE I'm sure he doesn't need you half as much as I do

ISABELLA Oh, if you need me, Caroline, of course I'll come
Somehow I felt you'd want me to-night We'll have a good cry together, darling

CAROLINE Oh, that will be nice

ISABELLA Good-bye till then, dearest, I suppose I'd better put on a tea-gown

CAROLINE Oh, yes, that'll be very suitable Dinner at eight sharp

ISABELLA Only an egg for me, Caroline

[*She goes out* ROBERT *bears her last word as he comes into the room*]

ROBERT When is she going to eat an egg?

CAROLINE For dinner

ROBERT How disgusting! Where?

CAROLINE Here

ROBERT You don't mean to say you've invited her to dinner?

CAROLINE Yes

ROBERT Why on earth have you done that?

CAROLINE You asked me to

ROBERT I never did anything of the sort Really, Caroline, you are too inconsiderate

CAROLINE I thought you wanted to play bridge afterwards

ROBERT Bridge! You might have known that this evening of all others I'd want to be alone with you Upon my word, it's too callous!

CAROLINE Oh, Robert!

ROBERT I'm staggering under the bitterest disappointment of my life I'm utterly miserable The only thing that consoled me was the thought of having a quiet evening alone with you so that we could have a good talk And you bring that cackling woman along

CAROLINE I thought you were so fond of her

ROBERT You know perfectly well that for ten years I've been supremely indifferent to every woman in the world but you

CAROLINE [*She begins to understand*] Oh! [*With a smile*] It's very nice of you to say so, dear Robert

ROBERT Caroline, I don't know how I'm going to bear it I feel as if the earth were tottering under my feet.

CAROLINE You must have patience, Robert.

ROBERT Patience! I've had patience for ten years And now just when the reward was put into my hands it's snatched away

CAROLINE You know, I expected you to be rather relieved at hearing that my husband was alive

ROBERT I? My dear Caroline, have you gone out of your mind?

CAROLINE You weren't so very anxious to marry me this morning

ROBERT Nonsense, Caroline You know very well that I've always been anxious to marry you

CAROLINE You dissembled with some skill, Robert

ROBERT I will be perfectly frank with you, Caroline At the first moment I was a little startled It meant beginning a new life and the change of all my habits But that was only a natural hesitation When you accepted me I *knew* I'd achieved the dearest wish of my heart Caroline, I've never wanted to marry you as much as I do now

CAROLINE Don't you think I'm a little old to marry?

ROBERT You?

CAROLINE It has occurred to me sometimes that I'm not quite so young as I was A spiteful person might say I was almost middle-aged!

ROBERT What nonsense! Why, you haven't reached your prime yet

CAROLINE Are you sure you see no change in me?

ROBERT None This morning I thought perhaps you were almost looking your age But now, I don't know what's happened to you, you look radiant You've not been making up, have you?

CAROLINE Oh, no, I never do that

ROBERT. You look eighteen You're ravishing If I hadn't been madly in love with you for ten years I should fall in love with you this afternoon.

CAROLINE It makes me feel so happy to hear you say that

ROBERT Oh, it's cruel that this man should come back just when we'd fixed everything up I want to be married to you, Caroline Why shouldn't we take the matter in our own hands and force the wretched fellow to divorce you?

CAROLINE We've discussed that so often and we've decided it was impossible We're slaves of our past, our circumstances, and our surroundings It can't be done, Robert

ROBERT D'you mean to say we must go on like this?

CAROLINE Are you sure we're not happier as we are? We can keep our ideals in one another Who knows what painful surprises marriage might bring us? You might find me flirtatious and exacting I might discover you were selfish and comfort-loving

ROBERT Hang it all, Caroline, I'm not selfish I have a passion for self-sacrifice

CAROLINE Nothing is so pleasant as to think of the sacrifices that one will never have to make

ROBERT Caroline, you don't know how I love you

CAROLINE Our love has lasted very long, Robert Don't you think a closer connection might give it all sorts of little rubs and wrenches till there was nothing of it left? One may reasonably ask one thing of life, that it shouldn't tear rents in the illusions it creates Illusion may be the foundation of all our happiness, but even if it is illusion let us keep it

ROBERT You may talk, but that man can't live for ever

CAROLINE He has a wonderful physique

ROBERT Next time he dies, I shall seize you by the hair your head and drag you to the altar

CAROLINE He'll see us both out I'm conscious that lives now with a new and different life. It may be

he's necessary for our happiness So, I cannot fade and
you will ever love My husband has been found [*With
immense decision*] And now, Robert, he will never die

ROBERT Caroline, I adore you

[He clasps her in his arms]

THE END

HOME AND BEAUTY

A FARCE

in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

WILLIAM, a hero

FREDERICK, another

VICTORIA, a dear little thing

MR LEICESTER PATON, a wangler

MR A B RAHAM, a solicitor

MISS MONTMORENCY, a maiden lady

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH, a mother-in-law

MISS DENNIS, a manicurist

MRS FOGSON, a respectable woman

TAYLOR, a parlourmaid

NANNIE, a nurse

CLARENCE, a boy

The action of the play takes place at Victoria's house in Westminster towards the end of November, 1918.

HOME AND BEAUTY

THE FIRST ACT

The scene is VICTORIA'S bedroom. It is the kind of bedroom which is only used to sleep in, and but for the bed, with its hangings and its beautiful coverlet, and the great lacquer dressing-table, crowded with the necessary aids to feminine beauty, might just as well be a sitting-room. There are graceful pieces of furniture here and there, attractive pictures on the walls, flowers; it is all very comfortable, luxurious and modish. In the fire-place a bright fire is burning.

VICTORIA, *a pretty little thing in a lovely "confection," which is partly tea-gown and partly dressing-gown, is lying on a sofa having her hands manicured.* MISS DENNIS, *the manicurist, is a neat, trim person of twenty-five. She has a slight cockney accent.*

MISS DENNIS [*Evidently ending a long story*] And so at last I said to him, Oh, very well, 'ave it your own way.

VICTORIA One has to in the end, you know.

MISS DENNIS He'd asked me five times, and I really got tired of saying no. And then, you see, in my business you get to know all the ins and outs of married life, and my impression is that, in the long run, it don't really matter very much who you marry.

VICTORIA Oh, I do so agree with you there. It all depends on yourself. When my first husband was killed poor darling, I went all to pieces. My bust simply went to nothing. I couldn't wear a low dress for months.

MISS DENNIS How dreadful.

VICTORIA I simply adored him But you know, I'm just as fond of my second husband

MISS DENNIS You must have one of those loving natures

VICTORIA Of course, I should never survive it if anything happened to my present husband, but if anything did—touch wood—you know, I couldn't help myself, I'd just have to marry again, and I know I'd love my third husband just as much as I loved the other two

MISS DENNIS [*Sighing*] Love is a wonderful thing

VICTORIA Oh, wonderful Of course, I'd wait the year I waited the year when my first was killed

MISS DENNIS Oh yes, I think one always ought to wait the year

VICTORIA I noticed you had an engagement ring on the moment you came in

MISS DENNIS I didn't really ought to wear it during business hours, but I like to feel it's there

VICTORIA I know the feeling so well You turn it round under your glove, and you say to yourself Well, that's settled Is he nice-looking?

MISS DENNIS Well, he's not what you might call exactly handsome, but he's got a nice face

VICTORIA Both my husbands have been very handsome men You know, people say it doesn't matter what a man looks like, but that's all nonsense There's nothing shows a woman off like a good-looking man

MISS DENNIS He's very fair

VICTORIA Of course, it's all a matter of taste, but I don't think I should like that myself They always say fair men are deceitful Both my husbands were dark, and they both had the D S O

MISS DENNIS That's funny, isn't it?

VICTORIA I flatter myself there are not many women who've been married to two D S O's I think I've done my bit

MISS DENNIS I should just think you had If it's not asking too much, I should like to know which of them you liked best

VICTORIA Well, you know, I really can't say

MISS DENNIS Of course, I haven't had the experience, but I should have thought you'd prefer the one who wasn't there That almost seems like human nature, doesn't it?

VICTORIA The fact is, all men have their faults They're selfish, brutal and inconsiderate They don't understand how much everything costs They can't *see* things, poor dears, they're cat-witted Of course, Freddie's very unreasonable sometimes, but then so was Bill And he adores me He can hardly bear me out of his sight They both adored me

MISS DENNIS That makes up for a great deal, I must say

VICTORIA I can't understand the women who complain that they're misunderstood I don't want to be understood I want to be loved

[TAYLOR *opens the door and introduces* MRS SHUTTLEWORTH *This is VICTORIA's mother, an elderly, grey-haired lady in black*

TAYLOR Mrs Shuttleworth

[*Exit*

VICTORIA [*Gushing*] Darling Mother

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH My precious child

VICTORIA This is Miss Dennis It's the only moment in the day she was able to give me

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH [*Graciously*] How do you do?

VICTORIA You don't mind coming up all these stairs, do you, darling? You see, we have to be dreadfully economical with our coal We tried to wangle more, but we couldn't manage it.

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Oh, I know The coal controller was positively rude to me Red tape, you know

VICTORIA They say we can only have two fires Of course, we have to have one in the nursery, and I must have one in my bedroom So I have to see people in here

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH And how are the precious darlings?

VICTORIA Fred's got a slight cold, and Nannie thought he'd better stay in bed, but Baby's splendid Nannie will bring him in presently

MISS DENNIS Are they both boys, Mrs Lowndes?

VICTORIA Yes But I'm going to have a girl next time

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Fred will be two next month,
Victoria

VICTORIA I know I'm beginning to feel so old Poor lamb, he wasn't born till three months after his father was killed

MISS DENNIS How very sad You don't like the nails too red, do you?

VICTORIA Not too red

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH She looked too sweet in mourning I wish you could have seen her, Miss Dennis

VICTORIA Mother, how can you say anything so heartless? Of course, black does suit me There's no denying that

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I insisted on her going to Mathilde Mourning *must* be well made, or else it looks nothing at all

MISS DENNIS Did you say your little boy's name was Fred? After his father, I suppose?

VICTORIA Oh no, my first husband was called William He particularly wanted the baby to be called Frederick after Major Lowndes You see, Major Lowndes had been my husband's best man, and they'd always been such great friends

MISS DENNIS Oh, I see

VICTORIA Then, when I married Major Lowndes, and my second baby was born, we thought it would be nice to give it my first husband's name, and so we called it William

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I was against it myself I thought it would always remind the dear child of what she'd lost

VICTORIA Oh, but, Mother darling, I don't feel a bit like that about Bill I shall never forget him [*To Miss DENNIS, pointing to a double photograph frame*] You see, I have their photographs side by side

MISS DENNIS Some men wouldn't like that very much

VICTORIA Freddie has me now He can't grudge it if I give a passing thought to that poor dead hero who's lying in a nameless grave in France

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Don't upset yourself, darling You know how bad it is for your skin She has such a soft heart, poor dear

VICTORIA Of course, now the war's over, it's different, but when Freddie was at the front I always thought it must be a consolation to him to think that if anything happened to him and I married again I should always keep a little corner in my heart for him

MISS DENNIS There, I think that's all for to-day, Mrs Lowndes Would you like me to come again on Friday?

[She proceeds to put away the various utensils she has been using]

VICTORIA [*Looking at her nails*] Please You do them beautifully There's something very satisfactory in a well-manicured hand It gives you a sense of assurance, doesn't it? If I were a man I would never want to hold a hand that wasn't nicely manicured

MISS DENNIS The gentleman I'm going to marry said to me that the first thing that attracted him was the way my nails were polished

VICTORIA One never knows what'll take a man's fancy

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Personally, I am a firm believer in first impressions And that is why I say to all the girls I know Whenever you are being shown into a drawing-room bite both your lips hard, give them a good lick, put your head in the air, and then sail in. There's nothing men like more than a red moist mouth I'm an old woman now, but I never go into a room without doing it

MISS DENNIS Fancy, now, I never thought of that I must try it and see

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH It may make all the difference to your life

VICTORIA Miss Dennis is engaged to be married, Mother

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Ah, my dear, don't make the common mistake of thinking that because you've got one man safe you need not make yourself attractive to others

VICTORIA On Friday next, then, Miss Dennis

MISS DENNIS Very well, Mrs Lowndes Is there anything you're wanting just at the moment?

VICTORIA Nothing, thanks

MISS DENNIS I've got a new skin food that they've just sent me over from Paris I would like you to give it a trial I think it's just the thing for your complexion

VICTORIA I'm afraid to try anything I don't know I've got such a delicate skin

MISS DENNIS It's been specially prepared for skins like yours, Mrs Lowndes The ordinary skin food is well enough for the ordinary skin, but a really beautiful skin like yours wants something very extra-special in the way of food

VICTORIA I expect it's frightfully expensive, and you know, they say we must economize I suppose somebody's got to pay for the war

MISS DENNIS I'll make special terms for you, Mrs Lowndes
I'll only charge you fifty-nine and six for a three-guinea
pot It's a large pot, as large as that [*She measures with
her fingers a pot about three inches high*] I promise you it's
not an extravagance A good skin food is an investment

VICTORIA Oh well, bring it with you next time you come

MISS DENNIS I'm sure you won't regret it Good afternoon,
Mrs Lowndes [*To MRS SHUTTLEWORTH*] Good
afternoon

[She goes out]

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I dare say she's right They pick up
a lot of experience, those women I always say the same
thing to girls Look after your skin, and your bills will
look after themselves

VICTORIA She was telling me that the Johnston Blakes are
going to divorce

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH [*Without concern*] Really Why?

VICTORIA He's been fighting for the last four years He
says he wants a little peace now

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I'm afraid many of these men who've
been away so long will have got out of the habit of being
married I dare say it was a mercy that poor Bill was
killed

VICTORIA Mother darling, how can you say anything so
dreadful?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Well, I must say I was thankful when
Freddie got a job at the War Office The difference
between men and women is that men are not naturally
addicted to matrimony With patience, firmness, and
occasional rewards you can train them to it just as you
can train a dog to walk on its hind legs But a dog would
rather walk on all fours and a man would rather be free.
Marriage is a habit

VICTORIA And a very good one, Mother

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Of course But the unfortunate thing about this world is that good habits are so much easier to get out of than bad ones

VICTORIA Well, one thing I do know, and that is that Freddie simply adores being married to me

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH In your place, I should have married Leicester Paton

VICTORIA Good heavens, why?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Have you never noticed that he wears spats? Men who wear spats always make the best husbands

VICTORIA It probably only means that he has cold feet I expect he wears bedsocks, and I should hate that

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Nonsense It means that he has a neat and orderly mind He likes things just so Everything in its place and at the proper season In fact, a creature of habit I am convinced that after six months of marriage Leicester Paton would forget that he'd ever been a bachelor

VICTORIA I was a soldier's widow I don't think it would have been very patriotic to marry a civilian

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH You girls all talked as though the war would last for ever Heroism is all very well, but at a party it's not nearly so useful as a faculty for small talk

[TAYLOR comes in]

TAYLOR Mr Leicester Paton has called, madam I said I didn't know if you could see him

VICTORIA Talk of the devil Oh yes, bring him up here

TAYLOR Very good, madam

[Exit]

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I didn't know you were seeing anything of him, Victoria

VICTORIA [*With some archness*] He's been rather attentive lately

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I knew I was right I felt sure you attracted him

VICTORIA Oh, darling, you know I can never think of anyone but Freddie, but of course it's useful to have someone to run errands for one And he can wangle almost anything one wants

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Butter?

VICTORIA Everything, my dear, butter, sugar, whisky

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Bite your lips, darling, and give them a good lick [*VICTORIA carries out the suggestion*]
You missed the chance of your life

VICTORIA After all, he never asked me

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Don't be silly, Victoria, you should have made him

VICTORIA You know that I adored Freddie Besides, ration books hadn't come in then

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH By the way, where is Freddie?

VICTORIA Oh, my dear, I'm perfectly furious with him He promised to take me out to luncheon, and he never turned up He never telephoned or anything, not a word I think it's too bad of him He may be dead for all I know

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Optimist

[*TAYLOR ushers in MR LEICESTER PATON, and then goes out He is a small, fat man, very well pleased with the world and with himself, beautifully dressed and obviously prosperous You could tell at a mile that he had so much money that he did not know what to do with it He is affable, gallant and easy.*]

TAYLOR Mr Leicester Paton

VICTORIA I hope you don't mind being dragged up all these stairs We have to be so dreadfully economical

with our coal I can only afford to have a fire in my bedroom

PATON [*Shaking hands with her*] You're not going to tell me that you have any trouble about getting coal Why on earth didn't you let me know? [*Shaking hands with MRS SHUTTLEWORTH*] How do you do?

VICTORIA You don't mean to say you could get me some?

PATON It's quite out of the question that a pretty woman shouldn't have everything she wants

VICTORIA I told Freddie that I felt sure he could wangle it somehow What's the use of being at the War Office if you can't have some sort of a pull?

PATON Leave it to me I'll see what I can do for you

VICTORIA You're a perfect marvel

PATON Now that these men are coming back from the front no one would look at us poor devils who stayed at home if we didn't at least make ourselves useful

VICTORIA You only stayed at home because it was your duty

PATON I attested, you know, I didn't wait to be called up But the Government said to me You're a shipbuilder go on building ships So I built them ships

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I think it was very noble of you

PATON And then they bring in a tax on excess profits As I said to the Prime Minister myself It's trying one's patriotism rather high It really is

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH A little bird has whispered to me that the Government intends to show its appreciation of your great services in the next Honours List

PATON Oh, one doesn't ask for that One's glad to have been able to do one's bit

VICTORIA How true that is That's just what I feel

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Victoria has worked like a dog, you know It's a marvel to me how her health has stood it

VICTORIA I don't know how many committees I've been on I've sold at twenty-three bazaars

PATON There's nothing that takes it out of one so much

VICTORIA At the beginning of the war I worked in a canteen, but I had to give that up, because I could never go out to lunch anywhere I thought at one time of working in a hospital, but you know all the red tape there is in those places—they said I had no training

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I'm sure you'd have made a wonderful nurse

VICTORIA I didn't propose to be the ordinary sort of nurse at all I was quite content to leave that to those unfortunate females who make their living by it But it doesn't want any particular training to be nice to those poor, dear, wounded boys, to shake out their pillows and take them flowers, and read to them It only wants sympathy

PATON I don't know anyone who has more

VICTORIA [*With a flash of her eyes*] With people I like

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Have you stopped your teas, darling?

VICTORIA Oh, yes, after the Armistice

PATON You used to give teas to wounded soldiers?

VICTORIA Yes, Tommies, you know I think it's so important to cultivate the personal relation I used to invite a dozen every Thursday At first I had them in the drawing-room, but it made them shy, poor dears, so I thought it would be nicer for them if they had it in the servants' hall I'm the only woman I know who never had the smallest trouble with her maids

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Darling, I think I'll go upstairs and see how my dear little grandson is I do hope it's not influenza

VICTORIA Yes, do, Mother He'll be thrilled to see you.

[MRS SHUTTLEWORTH goes out LEICESTER PATON, rising as she does, when he sits down again takes a place on the sofa beside VICTORIA]

PATON Is anything the matter with your little boy?

VICTORIA Poor darling, he's got a cold

PATON I'm so sorry

VICTORIA I dare say it's nothing, but you know what a mother is she can't help feeling anxious

PATON You're a wonderful mother

VICTORIA I adore my children

PATON [Going on with his sentence] And a perfect wife

VICTORIA D'you think so?

PATON Doesn't your husband?

VICTORIA Oh, he's only my husband. He is? doesn't count for d that he d

PATON Does he know what a lucky man?

VICTORIA If he does he's quite convinced you don't think he deserves to be

PATON I envy him. I wait to be

VICTORIA [Lashing a glance at him] I think I'm quite comfortable, then? If you?

PATON I'll tell you what I think. Suggest V

VICTORIA No, don't, you'll only exasperate me. You know, there are only two qualities that I'm self on. I'm not vain and I am unselfish

[FREDERICK comes in. He is a soldierly fellow in uniform, with red tabs and a number of ribbons on his tunic. He nods to LEICESTER PATON and shakes hands with him]

VICTORIA Freddie, where have you been all this time?

FREDERICK I've been at the club

VICTORIA But you promised to take me out to luncheon.

FREDERICK Did I? I forgot all about it. I'm so sorry.

VICTORIA Forgot? I suppose something more amusing turned up.

FREDERICK Well, I only said I'd come if I wasn't too busy.

VICTORIA Were you busy?

FREDERICK I was.

VICTORIA Bill was never too busy to give me luncheon when I wanted it.

FREDERICK Fancy that.

PATON I think I'll be getting along. Now the war's over you fellows can take things easily. My work goes on just the same.

FREDERICK That's a new car you've got, isn't it?

PATON I have to get about somehow, you know.

FREDERICK So do I, but being only a soldier I manage to do it on my flat feet.

PATON [*Shaking hands with VICTORIA*] Good-bye.

VICTORIA Good-bye. So nice of you to come and see me.

[LEICESTER PATON goes out]

VICTORIA I should be glad to know why you threw me over like that.

FREDERICK Are you obliged to receive visitors in your bedroom?

VICTORIA You don't mean to say you're jealous, darling? I thought you seemed grumpy. Is he put out? Let him come and give his little wife a nice kiss.

FREDERICK [*Irritably*] I'm not in the least jealous.

VICTORIA You silly old thing. You know it's the only room in the house that's got a fire.

FREDERICK Why the dickens don't you have one in the drawing-room?

VICTORIA My poor lamb, have you forgotten that there's

been a war and there happens to be a shortage of coal? I will tell you exactly why we don't have a fire in the drawing-room Patriotism

FREDERICK Patriotism be hanged The place is like an ice-house

VICTORIA Darling, don't be unreasonable After spending two winters in the trenches I shouldn't have thought you'd be such a slave to your comfort I know you don't mean it when you say patriotism be hanged, but you shouldn't say things like that even in jest

FREDERICK I'm dashed if I can see why it would be less patriotic to have a fire in the drawing-room where we could all benefit by it, rather than here where it's no good to anyone but you

VICTORIA [*Opening her eyes very wide*] Darling, you're not going to ask me to do without a fire in my bedroom? How can you be so selfish? Heaven knows, I don't want to boast about anything I've done, but after having slaved my life out for four years I do think I deserve a little consideration

FREDERICK How's the kid?

VICTORIA And it's not as if I grudged you the use of my room You can come and sit here as much as you like Besides, a man has his club He can always go there if he wants to

FREDERICK I apologize You're quite right You're always right

VICTORIA I thought you wanted me to be happy

FREDERICK I do, darling

VICTORIA Before we were married, you said you'd make that the chief aim of your life

FREDERICK [*Smiling*] I can't imagine that a sensible man could want a better one

VICTORIA Confess that you've been a perfect pig

FREDERICK A brute beast, darling

VICTORIA [*Mollified*] D'you know that I asked you to give me a kiss just now? It's not a request that I'm in the habit of having ignored

FREDERICK I trust it's not one that you're in the habit of making to all and sundry

[*He kisses her*]

VICTORIA Now tell me why you forgot to take me out to luncheon to-day

FREDERICK I didn't forget I was prevented I I haven't had any luncheon myself I'll just ring and ask the cook to send me up something

VICTORIA My poor lamb, the cook left this morning

FREDERICK Again?

VICTORIA How d'you mean again? This is the first time she's left

FREDERICK Hang it all, she's only been here a week

VICTORIA You needn't get cross about it It's much more annoying for me than for you

FREDERICK [*Irritably*] I don't know why on earth you can't keep your servants

VICTORIA No one can keep servants nowadays

FREDERICK Other people do

VICTORIA Please don't speak to me like that, Freddie I'm not used to it

FREDERICK I shall speak to you exactly as I choose

VICTORIA It's so petty to lose your temper just because you can't have something to eat I should have thought after spending two years in the trenches you'd be accustomed to going without a meal now and then

FREDERICK For goodness' sake don't make a scene

VICTORIA It's not I who am making a scene It's you who are making a scene

FREDERICK Victoria, I beg you to control yourself

VICTORIA I don't know how you can be so unkind to me
After all the anxiety I suffered on your account when
you were in France, I do think you might have a little
consideration for me

FREDERICK Seeing that for the last year I've had a perfectly
safe, cushy job at the War Office, I think you might by
now have recovered from any anxiety you felt on my
account

VICTORIA Must I remind you that my nerves were shattered
by poor Bill's death?

FREDERICK No, but I was confident you would

VICTORIA The doctor said I should need the greatest atten-
tion for several years I don't believe I shall ever quite
get over it I should have thought even if you didn't
love me any more you'd have a little human pity for me
That's all I ask, just the tolerant kindness you'd show
to a dog who was fond of you [*Working herself up into
a passion*] Heaven knows I'm not exacting I do every-
thing I can to make you happy I'm patience itself
Even my worst enemy would have to admit that I'm
unselfish [*As he is about to speak*] You weren't obliged
to marry me I didn't ask you to You pretended you
loved me I would never have married you if it hadn't
been for Bill You were his greatest friend You made
me love you because you spoke so beautifully of him
[*He is just going to say something, but she goes on implacably*]
That's my mistake I've loved you too much You're
not big enough to bear so great a love. Oh, what a
fool I've been I let myself be taken in by you, and I've
been bitterly punished [*Heading off the words she sees he
wants to speak*] Bill would never have treated me like
that Bill wouldn't have taken my poor, loving heart
and thrown it aside like an old hat Bill loved me He
would have always loved me I adored that man He

waited on me hand and foot He was the most unselfish man I ever knew He was a hero He's the only man I ever really cared for I was mad ever to think of marrying you, mad, mad, mad I shall never be happy again I would give anything in the world to have my dear, dear Bill back again

FREDERICK I'm glad you feel like that about it, because he'll be here in about three minutes

VICTORIA [*Brought up short*] What? What on earth d'you mean by that?

FREDERICK He rang me up at the club a little while ago

VICTORIA Freddie What are you talking about? Are you mad?

FREDERICK No Nor drunk

VICTORIA I don't understand Who talked to you?

FREDERICK Bill

VICTORIA Bill Bill who?

FREDERICK Bill Cardew

VICTORIA But, poor darling, he's dead

FREDERICK He showed no sign of it on the telephone

VICTORIA But, Freddie Freddie Oh, you're pulling my leg It's too beastly of you How can you be so heartless?

FREDERICK Well, just wait and you'll see for yourself [*Looking at his wrist watch*] In about two and a half minutes now, I should think

VICTORIA [*Coaxing him*] Now, Freddie, don't be vindictive I dare say I was rather catty I didn't mean it You know I adore you You can have a fire in your study, and damn the food controller I'm sorry for all I said just now There, now, it's all right, isn't it?

FREDERICK Perfectly But it's not going to prevent Bill from walking into this room in about two minutes and a quarter

VICTORIA I shall scream It's not true Oh, Freddie, if you ever loved me, say it's not true

FREDERICK There's no need to take my word for it

VICTORIA But, Freddie, darling, do be sensible Poor Bill was killed at the Battle of Ypres He was actually seen to fall He was reported dead by the War Office You know how distressed I was I wore mourning and everything We even had a memorial service

FREDERICK I know It'll want a devil of a lot of explaining, turning up like this

VICTORIA I shall go stark, staring mad in a minute How do you know it was Bill who spoke to you on the telephone?

FREDERICK He said so

VICTORIA That proves nothing Lots of people say they're the Kaiser

FREDERICK Yes, but they speak from a lunatic asylum He spoke from Harwich Station

VICTORIA I dare say it was somebody else of the same name

FREDERICK That's idiotic, Victoria I recognized his voice

VICTORIA What did he say exactly?

FREDERICK Well, he said he was at Harwich Station, and would be in London at 3 13 And would I break it to you?

VICTORIA But he must have said more than that

FREDERICK No, not much

VICTORIA For goodness' sake, tell me exactly what he said—exactly

FREDERICK Well, I was just coming along to take you out to luncheon, when I was told I was wanted on the telephone A long-distance call—Harwich

VICTORIA I know A seaport town

FREDERICK I strolled along and took up the receiver
said Is that you, darling?

VICTORIA Why did you say that?

FREDERICK That's always a good opening on the telephone
It puts the person at the other end at their ease

VICTORIA Idiot

FREDERICK Somebody said Is that you, Freddie? I thought
I recognized the voice, and I felt all funny Yes, I said
It's me, Bill, he said, Bill Cardew

VICTORIA For heaven's sake be quick about it

FREDERICK Hulloo, I said, I thought you were dead I
thought as much, he answered How are you? I said
Ai, he said

VICTORIA What an idiotic conversation

FREDERICK Damn it all, I had to say something

VICTORIA You ought to have said a thousand things

FREDERICK We only had three minutes

VICTORIA Well, go on

FREDERICK He said I'm just tootling up to London I'll
be up at 3 13 You might go along and break it to
Victoria Right ho, I said He said, So-long, and I said,
So-long And we rang off

VICTORIA But that was before luncheon. Why didn't you
come at once and tell me?

FREDERICK To tell you the truth I was a bit shaken by then
I thought the first thing was to have a double whisky
and a small soda

VICTORIA And what did you do then?

FREDERICK Well, I sat down to think. I thought steadily
for a couple of hours

VICTORIA And what have you thought?

FREDERICK Nothing

VICTORIA It seems hardly worth while to have gone without your lunch

FREDERICK It's a devilish awkward position for me

VICTORIA For you? And what about me?

FREDERICK After all, Bill was my oldest pal. He may think it rather funny that I've married his wife

VICTORIA Funny!

FREDERICK On the other hand, he may not

VICTORIA Why didn't you tell me the moment you came in, instead of talking about heaven knows what?

FREDERICK It wasn't a very easy thing to say. I was trying to find an opportunity to slip it in casually, don't you know

VICTORIA [*Furious.*] Wasting precious time

FREDERICK [*Blame.*] Darling, you surely don't think making a scene is ever waste of time

VICTORIA Now we haven't got a chance to decide on anything. I haven't even time to put a frock on

FREDERICK What the deuce do you want to put a frock on for?

VICTORIA After all, I am his widow. I think it would be only nice of me to be wearing mourning when he comes. What did he say when you told him?

FREDERICK When I told him what?

VICTORIA How can you be so stupid! When you told him you and I were married

FREDERICK But I didn't tell him.

VICTORIA Do you mean to say that he's coming here under the impression that I'm his wife?

FREDERICK Why, naturally

VICTORIA But why on earth didn't you tell him at once? It was the only thing to do. Surely you see that

FREDERICK It didn't strike me at the moment Besides, it's rather a delicate thing to say on the telephone

VICTORIA Well, someone must tell him

FREDERICK I've come to the conclusion that you're quite the best person to do that

VICTORIA P P Do you think I'm going to do all your dirty work?

FREDERICK I must say, I don't think it would come well from me

VICTORIA I'm not going to deal my darling Bill this bitter, bitter blow

FREDERICK By the way, it's—it's jolly he's alive, isn't it?

VICTORIA Ripping

FREDERICK I am glad, aren't you?

VICTORIA Yes, awfully glad

FREDERICK Then you'll just break the news as gently as you can, Victoria

VICTORIA [*As if she were weighing the matter*] I really don't think that's my province

FREDERICK [*Exercising all his charm*] Darling, you've got so much tact I never knew anyone who could deal with a delicate situation as you can You have such a light hand You're so sympathetic And you've got such a wonderful tenderness

VICTORIA I don't think you've got hold of the right line at all There's only one way to manage a thing like this You just take him by the arm and say Look here, old man, the fact is

FREDERICK [*Interrupting*] Victoria, you don't mean to say you're willing to give up the chance of making the biggest scene you've ever made in your life?

VICTORIA Now look here, Freddie, this is the only thing I've ever asked you to do for me in my life You know

how frail I am. I'm not feeling at all well. You're the only man I have to lean on.

FREDERICK It's no good, Victoria. I won't.

VICTORIA [*Furiously*] Damn you

FREDERICK By George, here he is

VICTORIA I've not even powdered my nose. Fortunately I have no personal vanity

[*She begins to powder herself feverishly. The voice is heard of someone coming up the stairs. Hulloa! Hulloa! Hulloa! Then the door is flung open and in bursts WILLIAM. He is a well-set-up, jovial fellow, wearing at the moment a very shabby suit.*]

WILLIAM Here we are again.

VICTORIA Bill!

FREDERICK Was I right?

VICTORIA I can hardly believe my eyes

WILLIAM Give me a kiss, old lady. [*He seizes her in his arms and gives her a hearty kiss. Then he turns to FREDERICK. They shake hands.*] Well, Freddie, old man, how's life?

FREDERICK Ah, thanks

WILLIAM Are you surprised to see me?

FREDERICK A little

VICTORIA In fact, a good deal

WILLIAM I'm jolly glad to see you here, Freddie, old man. On the way up in the train I cursed myself five times for not having asked you to wait with Victoria till I rolled up. I was afraid you might have some damned feeling of delicacy

FREDERICK I?

WILLIAM You see, it struck me you might think Victoria and I would want to be alone just the first moment, but I should have been as sick as a dog if I hadn't seen your ugly old face here to welcome me. By the way,

you've neither of you said you were glad to see me

VICTORIA Of course we're glad, Bill darling

FREDERICK Rather

WILLIAM Tactful of me to get old Freddie to come round
and break the news to you, I think, Victoria

VICTORIA Yes, darling, and exactly like you

WILLIAM It's just like old times to hear you call me darling
every other minute

FREDERICK It's one of Victoria's favourite words

WILLIAM You know, I nearly didn't warn you I thought
it would be rather a lark to break in on you in the
middle of the night

[FREDERICK and VICTORIA give a little start

VICTORIA I'm just as glad you didn't do that, Bill

WILLIAM What a scene, my word The sleeping beauty on
her virtuous couch Enter a man in a shocking old
suit Shrieks of the sleeping beauty It is I, your
husband Tableau

VICTORIA [*To turn the conversation*] You're quite right, it is
a shocking old suit Where did you get it?

WILLIAM I didn't get it I pinched it I must say I wouldn't
mind getting into some decent things

[*He walks towards a door that leads out of VICTORIA'S
room*

VICTORIA [*Hastily*] Where are you going?

WILLIAM I was going into my dressing-room. Upon my
soul, I almost forget what I've got I had a blue serge
suit that was rather dressy

VICTORIA I've put all your clothes away, darling.

WILLIAM Where?

VICTORIA In camphor You couldn't put them on until
they've been aired

WILLIAM Hell, said the duchess

[MRS SHUTTLEWORTH *comes in* WILLIAM *is standing so that at first she does not see him*

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I think the little lamb is going on nicely, Victoria

VICTORIA [*Swallowing*] Mother

WILLIAM I was just going to ask about the kid

[MRS SHUTTLEWORTH *jumps out of her skin She turns round and sees WILLIAM*

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Who is that?

WILLIAM Who the devil d'you think it is?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH The language and the voice—Bill Cardew's Who is that?

WILLIAM [*Walking towards her*] Well, I may be a bit thinner and it certainly is a shocking old suit

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Don't come near me or I shall scream

WILLIAM You can't escape me I'm going to kiss you

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Take him away Don't let him come near me Victoria, who is that man?

FREDERICK Well, Mrs Shuttleworth, it's Bill Cardew

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH But he's dead

FREDERICK He doesn't seem to know it

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH It's absurd Will someone wake me up

WILLIAM Shall I pinch her, and if so, where?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH It's a horrible dream. Of course he's dead That man's an imposter

WILLIAM Shall I show you the strawberry mark on my left shoulder?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH. I tell you Bill Cardew's dead.

WILLIAM Prove it.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH [*Indignantly*] Prove it? The War

Office announced it officially, Victoria went into mourning

WILLIAM Did she look nice in it?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Sweet Perfectly sweet I insisted on her going to Mathilde Mourning must be well made or else it looks nothing at all Why, we had a memorial service

FREDERICK Fully choral

WILLIAM Did you have a memorial service for me, Victoria?
That was nice of you

VICTORIA It was very well attended

WILLIAM I'm glad it wasn't a frost

FREDERICK I say, old man, we don't want to hurry you, you know, but we're all waiting for some sort of explanation

WILLIAM I was coming to that I was just giving you time to get over your first raptures at seeing me again Have you got over them?

FREDERICK I can only speak for myself

WILLIAM Well, you know, I was damned badly wounded

FREDERICK Yes, at Ypres A fellow saw you fall He said you were shot through the head He just stopped a minute, and saw you were killed, and went on

WILLIAM A superficial observer I wasn't. I was eventually picked up and taken to Germany

VICTORIA Why didn't you write?

WILLIAM Well, I think I must have been rather dotty for a bit I don't know exactly how long I was in hospital, but when I began to sit up and take nourishment I couldn't remember a damned thing My memory had completely gone

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Strange. To my mind very strange

WILLIAM I think my wound must have made me a bit

irritable When I was being taken along to a camp I had a difference of opinion with a German officer, and I laid him out By George, they nearly shot me for that Anyhow, they sentenced me to about a hundred and fifty years' imprisonment, and prevented me from writing, or making any sign that I was alive

VICTORIA But your memory came back?

WILLIAM Yes, gradually And, of course, I realized then that you'd think I was dead But I had no means of letting you know

FREDERICK You might have wired from Rotterdam

WILLIAM The lines were so congested They told me I'd arrive before my wire

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH It's all quite probable

WILLIAM More or less, I flatter myself But you can bet your life on one thing I'm not dead, and, what's more, I propose to live for another forty years, if not fifty

[TAYLOR comes in]

TAYLOR If you please, ma'am, where shall I put the gentleman's things? He told me to bring them upstairs

WILLIAM Oh, it's only a few odds and ends for the journey that I got on my way Put them in the dressing-room

VICTORIA No, leave that for the moment, Taylor We'll decide presently

TAYLOR Very good, madam

[She goes out]

WILLIAM What's the matter with the dressing-room, Victoria?

VICTORIA My poor darling, don't forget your arrival is a complete surprise Nothing is ready

WILLIAM Don't let that worry you After what I've been used to, I can pig it anywhere [Looking at the bed] By George, a spring mattress Father will sleep without rocking to-night.

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH [*Firmly*] Something's got to be done

WILLIAM How d'you mean?

VICTORIA [*Hurriedly*] We haven't got a cook

WILLIAM Oh, you needn't bother about that Freddie and I will do the cooking My speciality is a grilled steak. What can you do, Freddie?

FREDERICK I can boil an egg

WILLIAM Splendid They always say that's the one thing a chef can't do Nothing to worry about We'll get in some *pâte de foie gras* and a few oysters, and there you are Now let's have a look at the kid

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH He's not very well to-day I don't think he should leave his bed

WILLIAM Oh, all right I'll toddle up and see him I haven't made his lordship's acquaintance yet What's his name?

VICTORIA [*Rather nervously*] Don't you remember, just before you went away, you said you'd like him called Frederick if he was a boy

WILLIAM Yes, I know I did, but you said you'd see me damned You'd quite made up your mind to call him Lancelot

VICTORIA When I thought you were dead I felt I must respect your wishes

WILLIAM It must have been a shock if it took you like that

VICTORIA Of course, I asked Freddie to be godfather

WILLIAM Has the old ruffian been a stand-by to you while I've been away?

VICTORIA I I've seen a good deal of him.

WILLIAM I felt you were safe with him, you know. He's a brick

FREDERICK I say, you might spare my blushes while you're about it

VICTORIA He was very kind to me during my—bereavement

WILLIAM Dear old chap I knew you were a tower of strength

FREDERICK [*Sneating freely*] I . . . I did what I could, you know

WILLIAM Well, don't be so modest about it

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH [*More firmly*] I tell you something must be done

WILLIAM My dear Victoria, what is the matter with your mother?

FREDERICK [*Trying to change the conversation*] I think we might bust ourselves and have some bubbly to-night, Victoria

WILLIAM And damn the expense

FREDERICK I wonder if it's arrived yet I told them to send a case in the day before yesterday

WILLIAM Have you been running the cellar? Rash to let him do that, Victoria, very rash

VICTORIA I know nothing about wine

WILLIAM Freddie knows a thing or two I say, do you remember that last time we went on a bat together? You were blind to the world

FREDERICK Go to blazes! I was nothing of the sort

WILLIAM Pretty little thing that was Are you as thick with her as you used to be?

[VICTORIA *draws herself up and looks daggers at*
FREDERICK

FREDERICK [*With dignity*] I haven't an idea who you're referring to.

WILLIAM Oh, my dear old boy, don't put any frills on Victoria's a married woman, and she knows what the lads of the village are when they get out. A very nice little girl indeed, Victoria. If I hadn't been a married man I'd have had a shot at cutting Freddie out.

VICTORIA [*Itchy*] He always told me he'd never looked at a woman in his life.

WILLIAM You shouldn't encourage the young to lie. That's what they all say. Rapid. These wretched aeroplane fellows have been turning out engine after engine, and they can't keep pace with him. Talk of a lurid past, Mrs. Shuttleworth, veil your face.

FREDERICK My poor Bill, your memory! When you recovered it, I'm afraid you remembered all sorts of things that had never happened.

WILLIAM Past, did I say? Unless I'm very much mistaken, his present wouldn't bear the closest inspection.

FREDERICK By George, I've hit it. The poor fellow thinks he's being funny.

WILLIAM [*Going on*] I don't blame you. Make hay while the sun shines. I admire the way you can make love to three women at a time and make each one believe she's the only one you've ever really cared for.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH [*With determination*] If someone doesn't do something at once I shall do it myself.

WILLIAM [*In a whisper to Victoria, pointing at Mrs. Shuttleworth*] Air raids?

[*At that moment a baby's wail is heard outside*]

VICTORIA [*With agitation*] Willie.

WILLIAM Hulloo, what's that? Is that the kid? [*He goes swiftly to the door and opens it. The crying is heard more loudly*] Why, it's coming upstairs. You told me the kid was in the nursery. [*Addressing the nurse*] Bring him along and let me have a look at him.

[*A nurse, in a neat grey uniform, comes in with a baby in her arms*

VICTORIA [*Desperately*] Freddie, do something, even if it's only something stupid

FREDERICK The only thing that occurs to me is to stand on my head

WILLIAM [*Jovially*] Hulloo, hulloo, hulloo

FREDERICK That's not the way to talk to a baby, you owl

WILLIAM Not such a baby as all that Can he speak yet, Nurse?

NURSE Oh no, sir, not yet

WILLIAM Rather backward, isn't he? Not what I should have expected in a son of mine

[*The NURSE gives him a look of surprise, and then with a look at VICTORIA assumes an appearance of extreme primness*

NURSE I never knew a baby talk as young as that, sir

WILLIAM Upon my soul, there's not much of him Looks to me rather a stumer I think we've been done, Victoria

NURSE [*Indignantly*] Oh, I don't think you ought to say that, sir He's a very fine boy He weighs more than a good many do when they're six months

WILLIAM What's that? How old is he?

NURSE Four months last Tuesday, sir

WILLIAM You've been busy in my absence, Victoria.

VICTORIA Freddie, for goodness' sake speak Don't stand there like a stuffed tomato

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH Leave the room, Nannie

[*The NURSE, pursing her lips, intrigued and perplexed, goes out*

FREDERICK [*Trying to take it lightly*] The fact is, you've made rather an absurd mistake. You've been away so long that of course there's a good deal you don't know

WILLIAM I'm a simple creature.

FREDERICK Well, to cut a long story short——

WILLIAM What story?

FREDERICK I wish you wouldn't interrupt me I'm telling you as quickly as I can To cut a long story short, the infant that's just gone out of the room is not your son

WILLIAM I had a sort of suspicion he wasn't I tell you that frankly

VICTORIA Oh, the fool The blithering nincompoop.

WILLIAM Well, who the deuce is his father?

FREDERICK In point of fact, I am.

WILLIAM You? You don't mean to say you're married?

FREDERICK Lots of people are In fact, marriage has been quite the thing during the war

WILLIAM Why on earth didn't you tell me?

FREDERICK Hang it all, man, you've been dead for the last three years How could I?

WILLIAM [*Serzing his hand*] Well, I'm jolly glad to hear it, old chap I knew you'd be caught one of these days You were a wily old bird, but—ah, well, we all come to it My very best congratulations

FREDERICK That's awfully good of you I'm—er—I'm staying here, you know

WILLIAM Are you? That's first rate Is your missus here too?

FREDERICK. It's rather difficult to explain

WILLIAM Don't tell me she's only got one eye

FREDERICK Can't you guess why I'm staying here?

WILLIAM No [*He looks round the room and his eyes fall on MRS SHUTTLEWORTH*] You don't mean to say you've married Victoria's mother?

FREDERICK No, not exactly

WILLIAM What does he mean by *not exactly*? I hope you haven't been trifling with the affections of my mother-in-law

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Do I look as if I were the mother of that baby?

WILLIAM We live in an age of progress One should keep an open mind about things

FREDERICK You quite misunderstand me, Bill

WILLIAM Is there nothing between you and Victoria's mother?

FREDERICK Certainly not

WILLIAM Well, I'm sorry I should have liked to be your son-in-law And you would have done the right thing by her, wouldn't you?

VICTORIA Really, Bill, I don't think you should talk about my mother like that

WILLIAM If he's compromised her he ought to marry her

VICTORIA He hasn't compromised her and he can't marry her

WILLIAM I don't want to seem inquisitive, but if you didn't marry Victoria's mother, who did you marry?

FREDERICK Damn you, I married Victoria

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The drawing-room at VICTORIA'S house It is very bizarre VICTORIA has put the decoration into the hands of an artist in futurism, and the result is very modern, outrageous, fantastic, but not ugly There is no fire in the grate and all the windows are open FREDERICK is sitting in a greatcoat with a rug round his legs, reading the paper MRS SHUTTLEWORTH enters

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I'm going now.

FREDERICK Are you?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I'm taking my dear little grandchildren away with me

FREDERICK Are you?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH You don't seem in a very good temper this morning

FREDERICK I'm not

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Victoria will be down presently

FREDERICK Will she?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I should have thought you'd ask how she was after that dreadful shock.

FREDERICK Would you?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH She's better, poor darling, but she's terribly shaken. I put her to bed at once with hot-water bottles

FREDERICK Did you?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Of course, she was totally unfit to discuss this terrible situation yesterday

FREDERICK Was she?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Surely you can see that for yourself
The only thing was to keep her perfectly quiet till she'd
had time to recover a little

FREDERICK Was it?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH But this morning I have no doubt
you'll find her prepared to go into the matter

FREDERICK Shall I?

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH If you have nothing else you wish to
say to me I think I'll go now

FREDERICK Will you?

[MRS SHUTTLEWORTH purses her lips very tight and goes
towards the door At that moment TAYLOR comes in

TAYLOR Mr Leicester Paton has called, madam Mrs
Lowndes says, will you see him a minute She's just
getting out of her bath

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Certainly Show him in here

TAYLOR Very good, madam.

[Exit

FREDERICK I'll go

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH I wonder what he wants

FREDERICK Perhaps he wants Victoria's permission to pay
you his addresses

[He goes out In a minute TAYLOR announces LEICESTER
PATON and then goes out

TAYLOR Mr Leicester Paton

PATON Your daughter rang me up this morning I thought
the best thing I could do was to come along at once

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH That's too good of you I'm sure if
anything can be done you are the man to do it

PATON It's an extraordinary situation

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Of course, I think it was very
inconsiderate of Bill to turn up like that

PATON Poor thing, she must be quite upset.

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Well, I can only tell you that the shock entirely took the wave out of her hair. She only had it done yesterday, and it was as straight as a telegraph pole this morning.

PATON You don't say so.

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH Here she is.

[VICTORIA comes in. She has her dressing-gown on and bedroom slippers. Her hair is only partly done, but she manages to look perfectly ravishing.]

VICTORIA I didn't want to keep you waiting. I came down just as I was. You mustn't look at me.

PATON I can't help it.

VICTORIA What nonsense. I know I look a perfect fright, but fortunately I have no personal vanity.

PATON [Holding her hand] What a catastrophe! You must be beside yourself.

VICTORIA [With a charming smile] I knew I could rely on your sympathy.

PATON What in heaven's name are you going to do?

VICTORIA It's because I haven't an idea that I telephoned to you. You see, you've taught me to bring all my difficulties to you.

PATON To whom else should you bring them? We must think. We must discuss the matter.

VICTORIA The position is impossible.

PATON It's wonderful that you bear it so bravely. I was expecting to find you in a state of collapse.

VICTORIA [With a flash of the eyes] With you to lean on?

PATON I suppose you've been having the most terrible scenes.

VICTORIA Heartrending. You see, they both adore me.

PATON. And you?

VICTORIA I? I only want to do—my duty.

PATON How like you! How exactly like you

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH If there's nothing more I can do for you, darling I think I'll go now

VICTORIA Do, darling

MRS SHUTTLEWORTH [*Shaking hands with LEICESTER PATON*]
Be very kind to her

PATON I'll try

[MRS SHUTTLEWORTH *goes out*]

VICTORIA [*Almost tenderly*] It was sweet of you to come and see me at once I was afraid you wouldn't have time

PATON Do you imagine I should allow anything to stand in the way when you sent for me?

VICTORIA Oh, but you know I shouldn't like to think that you were putting yourself out on my account

PATON I wish I could pretend I were As a matter of fact, I was only going down to see a place I've just bought in the country, and as I wanted to try my new Rolls I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone

VICTORIA I didn't know you were buying a place

PATON Oh, it's a very modest little affair The park is not more than three hundred acres, and there are only twenty-eight bedrooms But you see, I'm a bachelor. I want so little

VICTORIA Where is it?

PATON It's near Newmarket

VICTORIA A very nice neighbourhood.

PATON A man in my position is bound to do something for the good of the country, and it seems to me that to patronize a good old English sport, which gives employment to numbers of respectable men, is an occupation which is truly patriotic I'm going to take up racing

VICTORIA I think it's splendid of you. So many men waste their money on their own selfish pleasures. It's such a relief to come across anyone who is determined to make a thoroughly good use of it. I've often wondered that that you didn't go into Parliament.

PATON For the last four years I've been too busy winning the war to bother about governing the nation.

VICTORIA Yes, but now. They want strong men of keen intelligence and dominating personality.

PATON It's not impossible that very soon I shall have the opportunity to show of what metal I am made. But not in the House of Commons.

VICTORIA [*All to pieces*] In the House of Lords?

PATON [*Rogusshly*] Ah, you mustn't ask me to betray the confidence of the Prime Minister.

VICTORIA You'll look sweet in scarlet and ermine.

PATON [*Gallantly*] But it's too bad of me to talk about my concerns when yours are so much more important.

VICTORIA Oh, you can't think how I love to hear you talk about yourself. One feels a brain behind every word you say.

PATON It's easy to be brilliant when one has a sympathetic listener.

VICTORIA Of course, Bill and Freddie are dear good fellows, but their conversation is a little limited. During the war it was rather smart to talk about guns, and flying machines, and flea-bags, but now . . .

PATON I understand you so well, dear lady.

VICTORIA Why do you call me that?

PATON Out of pure embarrassment. I don't know whether to call you Mrs. Cardew or Mrs. Lowndes.

VICTORIA Why don't you split the difference and call me Victoria?

PATON May I?

VICTORIA [*Giving him her hand*] It will make me feel that you are not an entire stranger to me

PATON [*With surprise*] Your wedding rings? You always used to wear two

VICTORIA As long as I thought that poor Bill was dead I didn't want to forget him

PATON But why have you removed them both?

VICTORIA I'm all at sea I'm married to two men, and I feel as if I were married to neither

PATON I wish you weren't I wish with all my heart you weren't

VICTORIA How emphatic you are Why?

PATON Can't you guess?

VICTORIA [*Looking down*] I must be very stupid

PATON Don't you know that I dote upon you? I curse my unhappy fate that I didn't meet you before you were married

VICTORIA Would you have asked me to marry you?

PATON Morning, noon and night until you consented

VICTORIA I never want a Paris model so much as when I know it's just been sold to somebody else I wonder if you'd want to marry me if I were free?

PATON Yes With all my heart

VICTORIA But I'm not free

PATON And you—if you were, would you marry me?

VICTORIA Tell me, why do you wear spats?

PATON I think they're so neat

VICTORIA Oh, not because you suffer from cold feet?

PATON Oh no, my circulation is excellent

VICTORIA I don't believe you're the sort of man who'd ever take no for an answer

PATON You're perfectly adorable

VICTORIA [*With a smile, shyly*] I wonder if you'd take me out to luncheon?

PATON Give me the chance

VICTORIA I'll just dress myself Come back in half an hour, and you'll find me ready

PATON Very well

VICTORIA Good-bye for the present

[*They go out together WILLIAM's voice is heard outside*

WILLIAM Victoria [*He comes in, but sees nobody in the room*]

Hulloal [*Shouting*] Freddie

FREDERICK [*Outside*] Hulloa

WILLIAM Freddie

[*FREDERICK comes in with his rug and his paper*

WILLIAM I say, I can't find my boots

FREDERICK Your boots? What do you want your boots for?

WILLIAM To put them on What else d'you think I want them for?

FREDERICK I saw them lying about I thought I'd better put them away in case of accidents

WILLIAM Silly ass. Where did you put them?

FREDERICK I was just trying to think

WILLIAM You don't mean to say you don't know where they are

FREDERICK Of course I know where they are because I put them there, but I don't happen to remember just at the moment

WILLIAM Well, you hurry up and remember

FREDERICK Don't fuss me. I can't possibly remember if you fuss me

WILLIAM Try and think where you put them.

FREDERICK [*Looking doubtfully at a vase*] I know I didn't put them in one of the flower vases

WILLIAM So I should hope

FREDERICK They might be in the coal-scuttle

WILLIAM If they are I'll black your face with them

FREDERICK [*Looking in the scuttle, with triumph*] I said they weren't in the coal scuttle

WILLIAM Fathead I don't want to know where they're not I want to know where they are

FREDERICK If I knew that I shouldn't be hunting for them

WILLIAM If you don't find them in two and a half seconds I'll break every bone in your body

FREDERICK It's no good losing your hair about it If we can't find your boots we can't

WILLIAM [*Irritably*] I say, what the devil have you got all the windows open for?

FREDERICK I was trying to warm the room a bit Besides, they say it's healthy

WILLIAM A short life and a merry one for me I like a fug

[He shuts the windows]

FREDERICK That won't make it any warmer I've tried that

WILLIAM You silly ass, why don't you light the fire?

FREDERICK Don't be so damned unpatriotic Victoria must have a fire in her bedroom, and we must have one in the nursery

WILLIAM Why?

FREDERICK. For the children's bath

WILLIAM [*Astonished*] What, every day?

FREDERICK Yes, they wash children a lot nowadays.

WILLIAM Poor little beggars

FREDERICK [*Jumping up and going towards him*] Where the devil did you get that suit?

WILLIAM Rather saucy, I flatter myself Victoria sent it in to me

FREDERICK She needn't have sent you the only new suit I've had since the war Upon my soul, I think it's a bit thick

WILLIAM Well, you didn't like the suit I wore yesterday You can't expect me to go about in fig-leaves unless you have the house properly warmed

FREDERICK If you'd had the decency to ask *me* you might have had this suit I've got on

WILLIAM Thanks, but I don't altogether like that one It's a bit baggy at the knees for me

FREDERICK You're very much mistaken if you think you're going to wear all the new clothes and I'm going to wear all the old ones

WILLIAM If you're going to be shirty about it, where the devil did you get that pin?

FREDERICK Oh, Victoria gave it me on my birthday

WILLIAM Well, it's mine She gave it me on my birthday first And where did you get those links?

FREDERICK Victoria gave them to me as a Christmas present

WILLIAM Oh, did she? She gave them to me as a Christmas present before she gave them to you You jolly well take them off

FREDERICK I'll see you blowed first At your death you left everything to her in your will If she chose to give them to me it's no business of yours

WILLIAM Well, I'm not going to argue about it, but I think it's dashed bad form to swank about in a dead man's jewellery

FREDERICK By the way, did you ever have a hammered gold cigarette-case?

WILLIAM Rather That was Victoria's wedding present to me. Did you get it too?

FREDERICK Thrifty woman, Victoria.

WILLIAM I say, unless I have a fire I shall turn into the Albert Memorial

FREDERICK Apply a match and see what happens

WILLIAM Thanks—I will

[He strikes a match and lights the fire The flames leap up]

FREDERICK Now I'll take my coat off Victoria will be furious

WILLIAM That's your look out You'll have to take the responsibility

FREDERICK It's got nothing to do with me. You're the master of this house

WILLIAM Not at all I am but an honoured guest

FREDERICK Oh no, the moment you appeared I sank into insignificance

WILLIAM My dear fellow, where did I sleep last night? In the spare bedroom That proves conclusively that I am a guest and nothing more

FREDERICK And where the devil do you think I slept? Here

WILLIAM Why did you do that? You were perfectly sober when I went to bed

FREDERICK Victoria said I couldn't sleep in the next room to hers now you were back.

WILLIAM Oh, well, I dare say you made yourself very comfortable on the sofa

FREDERICK Look at the damned thing.

WILLIAM By the way, what's the matter with the furniture?

FREDERICK When you were killed Victoria was naturally very much upset, so she had the drawing-room re-decorated

WILLIAM I dare say I'm not very bright so early in the morning, but I don't quite see the connection.

FREDERICK You see, the old room had too many painful associations She wanted to distract her mind

WILLIAM Oh, I was under the impression that you'd undertaken that

FREDERICK [*With dignity*] I was sympathetic That is surely what you would have liked me to be

WILLIAM Of course I'm not blaming you

FREDERICK If you'd seen Victoria in tears you couldn't expect a man not to try and console her

WILLIAM She's the only woman I ever knew who looks as pretty when she cries as when she smiles It's a great power

FREDERICK I knew you'd take it like a sensible man.

WILLIAM Quite so

FREDERICK When would you like me to clear out?

WILLIAM My dear fellow, why should you wish to do that? Surely you don't for a moment imagine that I shall be in the way I propose to make my visit quite a brief one

FREDERICK I'm sorry to hear that Victoria will be disappointed But of course that's no concern of mine You and your wife must arrange that between you

WILLIAM My dear old thing, you entirely misunderstand me I am not the man to come between husband and wife

FREDERICK What the devil do you mean?

WILLIAM Well, if it comes to that, what the devil do you mean?

[*VICTORIA comes in She now wears a most becoming morning dress She carries a box of chocolates.*]

VICTORIA Good-morning

[*She goes to WILLIAM and gives him her cheek to kiss.*]

WILLIAM Good-morning

VICTORIA Good-morning.

[She goes up to FREDERICK and gives him the other cheek to kiss]

FREDERICK Good-morning

VICTORIA *[With a nod of the head towards WILLIAM]* I went to him first because he's been away so long

FREDERICK Naturally And he was your husband long before I was

VICTORIA I don't want either of you to be jealous of the other I adore you both and I'm not going to show any favouritism

FREDERICK I don't see why he should have the spare bedroom, while I have to double up on the drawing-room sofa.

WILLIAM I like that What about the fatted calf?

FREDERICK Not unless you've brought your coupons with you

VICTORIA *[Catching sight of the fire]* Who lit that fire?

FREDERICK He did

WILLIAM It was your match

[VICTORIA draws up a chair and sits down in front of the fire in such a way as to prevent any warmth from getting into the room]

VICTORIA *[Eating a chocolate]* Of course you don't care if we run so short of coal that my wretched babies die of double pneumonia. It's simply criminal to have a fire here.

WILLIAM I'm tortured by the pangs of remorse But, need you monopolize it?

VICTORIA If there is a fire I may as well get some benefit out of it

FREDERICK Are those chocolates you're eating, Victoria?

VICTORIA Yes, Bobbie Curtis sent them to me. They're delicious

FREDERICK Are they?

VICTORIA It's so hard to get good chocolates just now

FREDERICK I know it is I haven't tasted one for months

VICTORIA [*Biting a chocolate*] Oh, this one's soft inside
How hateful Would either of you like it?

WILLIAM [*Ironically*] It seems a pity to waste it, Victoria

VICTORIA [*Eating it*] I dare say you're right One oughtn't
to be too particular in war-time

WILLIAM Ah, I suppose that's what you thought when you
married Freddie

VICTORIA I did that for your sake, darling He was such a
pal of yours

FREDERICK She was simply inconsolable when you were
killed

WILLIAM It's lucky you were there to console her.

VICTORIA It was Freddie who broke the news to me He
thought of the memorial service He came to see me
twice a day

WILLIAM And with your practical mind I suppose you
thought it hardly worth his while to wear out shoe-
leather when a trifling ceremony might save him the
journey

VICTORIA Of course we waited the year I told him he
mustn't think of it till the year was up

WILLIAM With leather so expensive? But you always had
nice feelings, Victoria.

VICTORIA You know how helpless I am without a man. I
knew you wouldn't wish me to remain a widow.

FREDERICK I felt I was the proper person to look after her

WILLIAM The way you've both of you sacrificed yourselves
for my sake is almost more than I can bear I can only
hope that you didn't have to force your inclinations too
much?

FREDERICK What do you mean by that?

WILLIAM Well, since it appears you married entirely for my sake, I presume there was nothing between you but—shall we say esteem?

VICTORIA Oh, but, Bill darling, didn't I tell you that I adored Freddie? It was his wonderful friendship for you that won my heart

FREDERICK She was so devoted to you, Bill, I should have been a brute not to care for her

WILLIAM One would almost think you fell in love with one another

VICTORIA Only over your dead body, darling

FREDERICK I should have thought you'd be rather touched by it

WILLIAM It gives me quite a lump in my throat

FREDERICK And Victoria never forgot you, old man Did you, Victoria?

VICTORIA Never

FREDERICK I know quite well that I only came second in her heart So long as you were round and about she would never have thought of me

WILLIAM Oh, I don't know about that Even the most constant woman likes a change now and then.

FREDERICK No, no I know Victoria's faithful heart She can never really love any man but you Victoria, you know how I adore you You are the only woman in the world for me. But I realize that there is only one thing for me to do Bill has come back. There is only one course open to me as a gentleman and a man of honour It is a bitter, bitter sacrifice, but I am equal to it. I renounce all rights in you. I will go away, a wiser and a sadder man, and leave you to Bill Good-bye, Victoria Wipe your mouth and give me one more kiss before we part for ever.

VICTORIA Oh, how beautiful of you, Freddie What a soul you've got

FREDERICK Good-bye, Victoria Forget me and live happily with a better man than I

VICTORIA I shall never forget you, Freddie Good-bye Go quickly or I shall break down

[WILLIAM has planted himself firmly in front of the door

FREDERICK goes up to him with outstretched hand

FREDERICK Good-bye, Bill Be kind to her. I couldn't do this for anyone but you

WILLIAM [*Deliberately*] Nothing doing

FREDERICK I am going out of your life for ever.

WILLIAM Not in those boots

FREDERICK Damn it all, what's the matter with them? They're not yours

WILLIAM A figure of speech, my lad

FREDERICK I don't think this is exactly the moment for flippancy You get away from that door

WILLIAM You shall only pass over my dead body.

FREDERICK What's the good of that? I shouldn't get the chance then

VICTORIA Bill, why prolong a painful scene?

WILLIAM My dear Victoria, I am not the man to accept a sacrifice like that No The War Office has decided that I'm dead You've had a memorial service You've redecorated the drawing-room. You are happy It would be monstrously selfish if I disturbed a state of things which is eminently satisfactory to you both. I will not come between you

VICTORIA Oh, Bill, how noble.

WILLIAM Victoria, I am a gentleman and a soldier This being that you see before you, notwithstanding the tolerable suit he wears, is a disembodied wraith. To all

intents and purposes I am as dead as mutton I will remain so

FREDERICK Victoria will never be happy with me now that you've come back

WILLIAM Not another word She is yours

FREDERICK My dear Bill, you know me very little I am lazy, selfish, bad-tempered, mean, gouty, and pre-disposed to cancer, tuberculosis, and diabetes

WILLIAM This is terrible, my poor Freddie You must take the greatest care of your health, and dear Victoria will do her best to correct your defects of character

FREDERICK If you really loved her you wouldn't expose her to the certain misery that it must be to live with a man like me

WILLIAM Freddie, old man, I can no longer conceal from you that with a constitution ruined by dissipation in my youth and broken by the ravages of war I have not much longer to live Besides, Victoria knows only too well that I am vindictive and overbearing, extravagant, violent and mendacious

VICTORIA I understand it all You're both so noble You're both so heroic. You're both so unselfish

[TAYLOR comes in

TAYLOR If you please, ma'am, someone to see you from the Alexandra Employment Agency

[She hands her a slip of paper.

VICTORIA Oh, send her in at once.

TAYLOR. Very good, madam.

[Exit.

VICTORIA. A cook. A cook. A cook.

FREDERICK: Good business Is she plain or good?

VICTORIA. Plain and good.

WILLIAM. How like a woman.

[TAYLOR *shows in* MRS POGSON *and closes the door behind her* MRS POGSON *is large and heavy and authoritative* *She is dressed like the widow of an undertaker*

MRS POGSON Good-morning.

VICTORIA Good-morning

[MRS POGSON *looks round her, and seeing a bandy chair sits down on it*

MRS POGSON I 'ave your name on the list the Alexandra gave me as requiring a cook I don't know as I very much like this neighbourhood, but I thought I'd just pop in and see if the position looked like suiting me

VICTORIA [*Ingratiatingly*] I'm sure you'd find it a very nice one

MRS POGSON I couldn't stand them air-raids and I made up my mind I wouldn't come back to London not so long as the war lasted And the streets all dark and I don't know what all But of course I prefer London.

VICTORIA Naturally

MRS POGSON And now that the war's over if I can find anything that suits me I don't mind coming back. Why did the last cook leave you?

VICTORIA She was going to be married.

MRS POGSON Ah, that's what all you ladies say Of course, it may be so, and on the other 'and it may not

VICTORIA She told me she hadn't had a nicer place for the last three months

MRS POGSON Now before we go any further I'd just like to know one thing Have you got a garage?

VICTORIA Well, we have, but there are no cars in it We sold our car

MRS POGSON Oh, well, that would be very convenient. I always bring my Ford with me.

VICTORIA Yes, of course.

MRS POGSON Do you keep men-servants?

VICTORIA No, I'm afraid not

MRS POGSON [*Severely*] I've always been used to men-servants

VICTORIA You see, since the war .

MRS POGSON Oh, you don't 'ave to tell me I know it's very difficult And I suppose you 'aven't got a kitchen-maid either?

VICTORIA One can't get one for love or money

MRS POGSON That's a thing I shall never forgive the Government for Taking all them girls and putting them in munitions Still, that's not your fault, I will say that There's many cooks I know as say they *will not* go without a kitchen-maid, but I say, it's war-time and everyone ought to do his bit If I must do without a kitchen-maid, well, I will do without a kitchen-maid

VICTORIA I think it's very patriotic of you

MRS POGSON Of course, I leave you to make any arrangements you like about lighting the kitchen fire All I ask is that it should be alight when I come down in the morning

VICTORIA Oh! Naturally, I see your point But I don't quite know how I should manage about that

MRS. POGSON In my last position the gentleman of the house lit the fire every morning.

VICTORIA. Oh, I hadn't thought of that

WILLIAM I wouldn't if I were you, Victoria.

MRS POGSON A very nice gentleman he was too Brought me up a cup of tea and a slice of thin bread and butter every day before I got up

VICTORIA I'm sure we'd do everything we could to make you comfortable.

MRS POGSON What cooking would you require?

VICTORIA I'm sure you'd satisfy us there I can see at once that you're a first-rate cook

MRS POGSON I don't 'old with a lot of fancy things meself, not in war-time I say, be thankful you get anything to eat at all

VICTORIA Of course, I know it's very difficult to have a great variety now I'm sure you'll do the best you can We're out for luncheon a good deal and we dine at eight

MRS POGSON Of course, you can please yourselves there, but I never do any cooking after middle-day

VICTORIA That's rather awkward

MRS POGSON If you don't think I'll suit you I needn't waste any more of my time I've got ten to a dozen ladies that I must interview this morning

VICTORIA Oh, I wouldn't make a point of that I dare say we can arrange our hours to suit you

MRS POGSON Well, I always serve up my dinner at one o'clock A nice little bit of meat and a milk pudding And should you want anything after that you can always 'ave the cold meat for your supper and any little sweet I 'appen to 'ave in the kitchen

VICTORIA I see And what—what wages are you asking?

MRS POGSON I don't know as I'm asking any wages I'm prepared to accept a salary of two pound a week

VICTORIA That's rather more than I've been in the habit of paying

MRS POGSON If you aren't prepared to pay that there are plenty as are.

VICTORIA We won't quarrel about that I'm sure you're worth the money.

MRS POGSON I don't think there are any more questions I need ask you

VICTORIA No, I think that's everything When would you be able to come in?

MRS POGSON I'll just go and see these other ladies and see what they 'ave to offer me, and then if I come to the conclusion that you'll suit me I'll just drop you a line

VICTORIA I do hope you'll come here I'm sure you'd be happy

MRS POGSON That's what I always say, the great thing is to be 'appy And I like your face I don't mind telling you that I've taken quite a fancy to you

VICTORIA I'm very glad to hear it

MRS POGSON There, I was just going away and I knew I 'ad one more question to ask you My 'ead's like a perfect sieve this morning How many are you in the family?

VICTORIA Well, I have two children, but they give no trouble at all, and just at present they're not staying here

MRS POGSON Oh, I don't mind children I've had too many meself to do that

VICTORIA And then there's just me and these two gentlemen

MRS POGSON I suppose you are married to one of them.

VICTORIA I don't know what you mean by that I'm married to both

MRS POGSON Both? Legally?

VICTORIA Of course

MRS POGSON Well, I do call that going it [*With growing indignation*] If it 'ad been just a gentleman friend I'd 'ave 'ad nothing to say I've lived in the very best families and I'm quite used to that It keeps the lady quiet and good-tempered and she ain't always fussing about one thing and another And if he lives in the 'ouse she ain't likely to keep the dinner waiting for 'alf an hour every other day But if you're married to 'im that's quite another thing It's not justice If you ladies think

you're going to 'ave two 'usbands while many a working woman can't even get one—well, all I say is, it's not justice I've bin a Conservative all me life, but thank God I've got a vote now, and I tell you straight what I'm going to do, I'm going to vote Labour.

[She flounces out of the room and slams the door behind her]

WILLIAM Bang!

VICTORIA *[Furiously]* The position is intolerable I must have one husband There are all sorts of ways in which a husband is indispensable But only one I cannot and will not have two

FREDERICK I have an idea

WILLIAM It's sure to be a rotten one.

FREDERICK Let's draw lots

WILLIAM I knew it was a rotten one.

VICTORIA How d'you mean, Freddie?

FREDERICK Well, we'll take two pieces of paper and make a cross on one of them Then we'll fold them up and put them in a hat We'll draw, and the one who draws the cross gets Victoria

VICTORIA *[Mollified]* That'll be rather thrilling

WILLIAM I'd sooner toss for it I'm lucky at tossing.

FREDERICK Do you mean to say you funk it?

WILLIAM I don't exactly funk it It's an awful risk to take

VICTORIA. It'll be so romantic. Get some paper, Freddie

FREDERICK All right

WILLIAM *[Worried]* I don't like it. This isn't my lucky day I saw the new moon through glass. I knew something was going wrong the moment I opened my egg this morning

[FREDERICK goes to a desk and takes out a sheet of paper which he tears in two. Then with his back turned he draws a cross]

FREDERICK Whoever draws the blank paper renounces all claim to Victoria. He vanishes from the scene like a puff of smoke. He will never be heard of again.

WILLIAM I don't like it. I repeat that I only do it under protest.

VICTORIA Now, Bill, don't be disagreeable the moment you come back.

FREDERICK You'll have plenty of time for that during the next forty years.

VICTORIA You seem rather above yourself, Freddie. Supposing *you* draw the blank?

FREDERICK I saw a dappled horse this morning. What shall we put them in?

VICTORIA The waste-paper basket is the best thing.

FREDERICK I'll get it. Now you quite understand. One of these papers has a cross on it. I will put the two papers in the basket, and Victoria shall hold it. It is agreed that whoever draws a blank shall leave the house at once.

WILLIAM [*Faintly*] Yes.

FREDERICK [*Handing her the basket*] Here you are, Victoria.

WILLIAM [*With agitation*] Shake 'em well.

VICTORIA All right. I say, isn't this thrilling?

FREDERICK You draw first, Bill.

WILLIAM [*Shaking like a leaf*] No, I can't. I really can't.

FREDERICK It's your right. You are Victoria's first husband.

VICTORIA He's right there, Bill. You must have the first dip in the lucky bag.

WILLIAM This is awful. I'm sweating like a pig.

VICTORIA. It's too exciting. My heart is simply going pit-a-pat. I wonder which of you will get me.

WILLIAM [*Hesitating*] Going over the top is nothing to it.

FREDERICK. Courage, old man, courage.

WILLIAM It's no good, I can't You must remember that my nerves are all to pieces after three years in a German prison

VICTORIA I see how much you love me, Bill

FREDERICK Shut your eyes, man, and make a plunge for the basket

WILLIAM The only thing is to get it over I wish I'd been a better man

[He draws out one of the pieces of paper and FREDERICK takes the other For a moment he looks at it nervously, unable to bring himself to unfold it FREDERICK opens his, gives a sudden cry, and starts back.]

FREDERICK *[Dramatically]* Blank Blank Blank

[WILLIAM gives a start, and quickly unravels the paper in his hand He stares at it in horror]

WILLIAM My God!

VICTORIA Oh, my poor Freddie!

FREDERICK *[With enormous feeling]* Don't pity me, Victoria I want all my courage now I've lost you and I must bid you good-bye for ever

VICTORIA Oh, Freddie, this is too dreadful! You must come and see me from time to time

FREDERICK I couldn't That is more than I could bear I shall never forget you You are the only woman I have ever loved

[At these words WILLIAM looks up and observes him curiously]

VICTORIA You'll never love another, will you? I shouldn't like that

FREDERICK How could I love anyone after you? Why, you might as well ask a man to see when the sun has gone down.

WILLIAM He can turn on the electric light, you know.

FREDERICK Ah, you can jest I am a broken-hearted and a ruined man.

WILLIAM I was only suggesting the possibility of consolation

VICTORIA I don't think that's very nice of you, Bill I thought what he said extremely poetic Besides, I don't want him to be consoled

FREDERICK Give me one last kiss, Victoria.

VICTORIA Darling!

[He seizes her in his arms and kisses her]

FREDERICK *[The hero of romance]* Good-bye I go into the night

WILLIAM Oh, aren't you going at once?

FREDERICK I am

WILLIAM Well, it happens to be the middle of the day

FREDERICK *[With dignity]* I was speaking in metaphor

WILLIAM Before you go you might just let me have a look at that other bit of paper, the one with the blank on it

FREDERICK *[Walking towards the door]* Oh, don't delay me with foolish trifling

WILLIAM *[Intercepting him]* I'm sorry to detain you

FREDERICK *[Trying to dodge round him]* Why d'you want to see it?

WILLIAM *[Preventing him]* Mere curiosity

FREDERICK *[Trying the other side]* Really, Bill, I don't know how you can be so heartless as to give way to curiosity when my heart is one great aching wound.

WILLIAM I should like to have the two pieces framed, an interesting souvenir of an important occasion.

FREDERICK Any other piece will do just as well I threw that one in the fire

WILLIAM Oh no, you didn't. You put it in your pocket.

FREDERICK I've had enough of this Can't you see that I'm a desperate man?

WILLIAM Not half so desperate as I am If you don't give me that bit of paper quietly I'll take it from you

FREDERICK Go to blazes!

WILLIAM Give it up

[He makes a dash for FREDERICK, who dodges, he pursues him round the room]

VICTORIA What's the matter? Have you both gone mad?

WILLIAM You'll have to sooner or later.

FREDERICK I'll see you damned first

VICTORIA Why don't you give it him?

FREDERICK Not if I know it

VICTORIA Why not?

FREDERICK I won't have my feelings hurt like this

WILLIAM I'll hurt a lot more than your feelings in a minute

[FREDERICK makes a sudden bolt for the door, but WILLIAM catches him]

WILLIAM Got cher Now will you give it up?

FREDERICK Not on your life

WILLIAM I'll break your bally arm if you don't

FREDERICK *[Writhing]* Oh, you devil! Stop it. You're hurting me

WILLIAM I'm trying to.

FREDERICK: Hit him on the head with the poker, Victoria

WILLIAM Don't be unlady-like, Victoria.

FREDERICK You filthy Boche All right, here it is

[WILLIAM lets him go and FREDERICK takes the paper out of his pocket Just as WILLIAM thinks he is going to give it him, he puts it in his mouth]

WILLIAM *[Seizing him by the throat.]* Take it out of your mouth

[FREDERICK takes it out and throws it on the floor]

FREDERICK I don't know if you call yourself a gentleman

[WILLIAM takes up the paper and unfolds it]

WILLIAM You dirty dog

VICTORIA What's the matter?

[He walks over and hands it to her]

WILLIAM Look.

VICTORIA. Why, it's got a cross on it

WILLIAM [Indignantly] They both had crosses on them

VICTORIA I don't understand

WILLIAM Don't you? He was making quite sure that I shouldn't draw a blank.

[VICTORIA looks at him in astonishment There is a moment's pause]

FREDERICK [Magnanimously] I did it for your sake,
VICTORIA I knew that your heart was set on Bill, only
you couldn't bear to hurt my feelings, so I thought I'd
make it easier for you

VICTORIA That was just like you, Freddie You have a
charming nature

WILLIAM [Acidly] It almost brings tears to my eyes

FREDERICK I'm made that way I can't help sacrificing
myself for others

[TAYLOR comes in]

TAYLOR May I speak to you for a minute, madam.

VICTORIA Not now I'm busy

TAYLOR I'm afraid it's very urgent, madam

VICTORIA Oh, very well, I'll come Don't say anything
important till I come back

[TAYLOR holds the door open for her, and she goes out.]

FREDERICK How did you guess?

WILLIAM You were so devilish calm about it

FREDERICK That was the calm of despair

[WILLIAM is sitting on the sofa. He happens to put his hand behind him and feels something hard. With a puzzled expression he puts down his hand between the seat and the back of the sofa and draws out first one boot and then another]

WILLIAM My boots!

FREDERICK I knew I'd put them somewhere

WILLIAM You didn't put them anywhere. You hid them, you dirty dog

FREDERICK It's a lie. Why the dickens should I hide your rotten old boots?

WILLIAM You were afraid I'd do a bunk

FREDERICK You needn't get ratty about it. I only ascribed to you the disinterested motives that I—that I have myself. I may be wrong, but, after all, it's a noble error.

WILLIAM One might almost think you didn't want Victoria

[FREDERICK looks at him for a moment thoughtfully, then he makes up his mind to make a clean breast of it]

FREDERICK Bill, old chap, you know I'm not the sort of man to say a word against my wife

WILLIAM Nor am I the sort of man to listen to a word against mine.

FREDERICK But, hang it all, if a fellow can't discuss his wife dispassionately with her first husband, who can he discuss her with?

WILLIAM I can't imagine unless it's with her second

FREDERICK Tell me what you really think of Victoria.

WILLIAM She's the sweetest little woman in the world.

FREDERICK No man could want a better wife.

WILLIAM She's pretty.

FREDERICK Charming.

WILLIAM Delightful

FREDERICK I confess that sometimes I've thought it hard that when I wanted a thing it was selfishness, and when she wanted it, it was only her due

WILLIAM I don't mind admitting that sometimes I used to wonder why it was only natural of me to sacrifice my inclinations, but in her the proof of a beautiful nature

FREDERICK It has tried me now and then that in every difference of opinion I should always be wrong and she should always be right

WILLIAM Sometimes I couldn't quite understand why my engagements were made to be broken, while nothing in the world must interfere with hers

FREDERICK I have asked myself occasionally why my time was of no importance while hers was so precious

WILLIAM I did sometimes wish I could call my soul my own

FREDERICK The fact is, I'm not worthy of her, Bill As you so justly say, no man could want a better wife . .

WILLIAM [*Interrupting*] No, you said that

FREDERICK But I'm fed up If you'd been dead I'd have seen it through like a gentleman, but you've turned up like a bad shilling Now you take up the white man's burden

WILLIAM I'll see you damned first

FREDERICK She must have one husband.

WILLIAM Look here, there's only one thing to do. She must choose between us

FREDERICK That's not giving me a chance

WILLIAM I don't know what you mean by that I think it's extraordinarily magnanimous on my part

FREDERICK Magnanimous be hanged I've got a charming nature and I'm extremely handsome Victoria will naturally choose me

WILLIAM Heaven knows I'm not vain, but I've always been given to understand that I'm an almost perfect specimen of manly beauty. My conversation is not only amusing, but instructive.

FREDERICK I'd rather toss for it.

WILLIAM I'm not going to risk anything like that. I've had enough of your hanky-panky.

FREDERICK I thought I was dealing with a gentleman.

WILLIAM Here she comes.

[VICTORIA comes in. *She is in a temper.*]

VICTORIA All the servants have given notice now.

FREDERICK They haven't!

VICTORIA I've done everything in the world for them. I've given them double wages. I've fed them on the fat of the land. I've given them my own butter and my own sugar to eat.

FREDERICK Only because they were bad for your figure, Victoria.

VICTORIA They didn't know that. I've given them all the evenings out that I really didn't want them. I've let them bring the whole British Army to tea here. And now they give me notice.

WILLIAM It's a bit thick, I must say.

VICTORIA I argued with them, I appealed to them, I practically went down on my knees to them. They wouldn't listen. They're going to walk out of the house this afternoon.

WILLIAM Oh, well, Freddie and I will do the housework until you get some more.

VICTORIA Do you know that it's harder to get a parlour-maid than a peerage? Why, every day at Paddington Registry Office you'll see a queue of old bachelors taking out licences to marry their cooks. It's the only way to keep them.

WILLIAM Well, Victoria, we've decided that there's only one thing to be done. You must choose between us.

VICTORIA How can I? I adore you both. Besides, there's so little to choose between you.

WILLIAM Oh, I don't know about that. Freddie has a charming nature and he's extremely handsome.

FREDERICK I wish you wouldn't say that, Bill. Heaven knows you're not vain, but I must tell you to your face that you're an almost perfect specimen of manly beauty, and your conversation is not only amusing but instructive.

VICTORIA I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings.

FREDERICK Before you decide, I feel it only fair to make a confession to you. I could not bear it if our future life were founded on a lie. Victoria, in my department there is a stenographer. She is of the feminine gender. She has blue eyes and little yellow curls at the nape of her neck. The rest I leave to your imagination.

VICTORIA How abominable. And I always thought you had such a nice mind.

FREDERICK I am unworthy of you. I know it only too, too well. You can never forgive me.

WILLIAM Dirty dog.

VICTORIA. That certainly simplifies matters. I don't quite see myself as the third lady in the back row of a harem.

WILLIAM You would run no risk of being that in Canada. Women are scarce in Manitoba.

VICTORIA What *are* you talking about?

WILLIAM. I have come to the conclusion that England offers me no future now the war is over. I shall resign my commission. The empire needs workers, and I am ready to take my part in reconstruction. Make me the happiest of men, Victoria, and we'll emigrate together.

VICTORIA To Canada?

FREDERICK Where the sables come from.

VICTORIA Not the best ones

WILLIAM I shall buy a farm. I think it would be a very good plan if you employed your leisure in learning how to cook the simple fare on which we shall live. I believe you can wash?

VICTORIA [*With asperity*] Lace

WILLIAM But I think you should also learn how to milk cows

VICTORIA I don't like cows

WILLIAM I see the idea appeals to you. It will be a wonderful life, Victoria. You'll light the fire and scrub the floors, and you'll cook the dinner and wash the clothes. You'll vote.

VICTORIA And what shall I do in my spare moments?

WILLIAM We will cultivate your mind by reading the *Encyclopædia Britannica* together. Take a good look at us, Victoria, and say which of us it's to be.

VICTORIA To tell you the truth, I don't see why it should be either.

FREDERICK Hang it all, it must be one or the other.

VICTORIA I think no one can deny that since the day I married you I've sacrificed myself in every mortal way. I've worked myself to the bone to make you comfortable. Very few men have ever had such a wife as I've been to both of you! But one must think of oneself sometimes.

WILLIAM How true.

VICTORIA The war is over now, and I think I've done my bit. I've married two D S O's. Now I want to marry a Rolls-Royce.

FREDERICK. [*Astonished*] But I thought you adored us.

VICTORIA. Well, you see, I adore you both. It's six of one

and half a dozen of the other, and the result is . .

WILLIAM A wash-out

FREDERICK Hang it all, I think it's a bit thick. Do you mean to say that you've fixed up to marry somebody else behind our back?

VICTORIA You know I wouldn't do a thing like that, Freddie

FREDERICK Well, I don't tumble.

VICTORIA My dear Freddie, have you ever studied the domestic habits of the unicorn?

FREDERICK I am afraid my education was very much neglected

VICTORIA The unicorn is a shy and somewhat timid animal, and it is impossible to catch him with the snares of the hunter. But he is strangely impressionable to the charms of the fair sex. When he hears the frou-frou of a silk petticoat he forgets his native caution. In short, a pretty woman can lead him by the nose

[TAYLOR comes in]

TAYLOR Mr Leicester Paton is downstairs in his car, madam.

VICTORIA Is it the Rolls-Royce?

TAYLOR I think it is, madam

VICTORIA [*With a smile of triumph*] Say I'll come down at once

TAYLOR Very good, madam.

[Exit]

VICTORIA The unicorn's going to take me out to luncheon.

[*She makes a long nose at them and goes out*]

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

The kitchen At one end is a range, with a gas-stove, at the other end a dresser on which are plates and dishes At the back a door leads out to the area and near it is a window, with iron bars, through which can be seen the area steps and persons ascending and descending them In the middle of the room is a kitchen table, and here and there kitchen chairs There is linoleum on the floor The place is clean, sanitary, and cheerful

WILLIAM *is sitting on one of the chairs with his feet on another, reading a thin, paper-bound novel of the sort that is published at threepence and sold by the newsagent round the corner*
FREDERICK *comes in with a scuttle full of coals*

FREDERICK [*Putting down the scuttle*] I say, these coals weigh about a ton. You might carry them upstairs

WILLIAM [*Cheerfully*] I might, but I'm not going to.

FREDERICK I wouldn't ask you, only since I was wounded in the arm serving my country I haven't the strength I had once

WILLIAM [*Suspiciously.*] Which arm were you wounded in?

FREDERICK [*Promptly*] Both arms

WILLIAM Carry the coals on your head then I believe that's the best way really. And they say it improves the figure

FREDERICK You heartless devil

WILLIAM I'd do it like a shot, old man, only the doctor said it was very bad for my heart to carry heavy weights.

FREDERICK What's the matter with your heart? You said you were wounded in the head.

WILLIAM Besides, it isn't my work I'm doing the cooking
You really can't expect me to do housework as well

FREDERICK *Are* you doing the cooking? It looks to me as though you were just sitting about doing nothing I don't see why I should have to sweat my life out

WILLIAM You see, you have no organization Housework's perfectly simple, only you must have organization I have organization That's my secret

FREDERICK I was a mug to say I'd do the housework I might have known you'd freeze on to a soft job if there was one.

WILLIAM I naturally undertook to do what I could do best That is one of the secrets of organization Cooking is an art Any fool can do housework

FREDERICK I'll give you a thick ear in a minute You just try and get a shine on a pair of boots and see if it's easy

WILLIAM I don't believe you know how to shine a pair of boots Did you spit on them?

FREDERICK No, only on the silver

WILLIAM You just look nippy and get the table laid while I finish my book.

FREDERICK [*Gloomily*] Is it luncheon or dinner?

WILLIAM I don't know yet, but we're going to have it down here because it's easier for dishing up Organization again

FREDERICK What does Victoria say to that?

WILLIAM I haven't told her yet

FREDERICK She's in an awful temper this morning

WILLIAM Why?

FREDERICK Because the water in the bathroom wasn't hot

WILLIAM Wasn't it?

FREDERICK You know very well it wasn't.

WILLIAM: I think cold baths are much better for people.

There'd be a damned sight less illness about if cold baths were compulsory

FREDERICK Tell that to the horse-marines You were too lazy to get up in time That's all there is to it

WILLIAM I wish you'd get on with your work instead of interrupting me all the time

FREDERICK You don't look as if you were so busy as all that

WILLIAM I want to find out if the nursery governess married the duke after all. You should read this after I've finished it

FREDERICK I don't have time for reading When I take on a job I like to do it properly

WILLIAM I wish you wouldn't mumble

FREDERICK What is there for lunch? [*He goes over to the stove and takes a cover off a saucepan*] What's this mess?

WILLIAM Those are potatoes You might give one of them a jab with a fork to see how they're getting on

FREDERICK It seems rather unfriendly, doesn't it?

WILLIAM. Oh no, they're used to it

[*FREDERICK takes a fork and tries to transfix a potato*]

FREDERICK Damn it all, they won't stop still They're wriggling all over the place Wriggle, wriggle, little tater How I wonder who's your mater Poetry! Come here, you little devil. Woa there.

WILLIAM I say, don't make such a row This is awfully exciting He's plunged both his hands into her hair.

FREDERICK. Dirty trick, I call it

WILLIAM Why? She'd washed it

FREDERICK. [*Bringing out a potato*] Damn it all, they're not skinned.

WILLIAM I suppose you mean peeled.

FREDERICK If there's anything I dislike it's potatoes in their skins

WILLIAM It's simply waste to peel potatoes I never peel potatoes

FREDERICK Is that organization?

WILLIAM Well, if you ask me, that's just what it is.

FREDERICK Ever since I've been at the War Office I've heard fellows talk of organization, but I never could find anyone to tell me just what it was It's beginning to dawn on me now

WILLIAM [*Still reading*] Well, what is it?

FREDERICK I'm not going to tell you unless you listen

WILLIAM [*Looking up*] He's just glued his lips to hers Well?

FREDERICK Organization means getting someone else to do your job for you if you can, and if you can't, letting it rip

WILLIAM I suppose you think you're funny

FREDERICK [*Putting the potato back in the saucepan*] The steak smells as though it was almost done

WILLIAM Done? It's only been on about a quarter of an hour

FREDERICK But in a grill-room they do you steak in ten minutes

WILLIAM I don't care about that. You cook meat a quarter of an hour for every pound I should have thought any fool knew that.

FREDERICK: What's that got to do with it?

WILLIAM I bought three pounds of steak, so I'm going to cook it for three-quarters of an hour

FREDERICK Well, it looks to me as if it wanted eating now

WILLIAM That's only its cunning It won't be ready for ages yet. I wish you'd let me get on with my story.

FREDERICK. [*Puzzled*] But look here, if there were three steaks of a pound each you'd cook them a quarter of an hour each

WILLIAM Exactly That's what I say That comes to three-quarters of an hour

FREDERICK But, hang it all, it's the same quarter of an hour

WILLIAM You make me tired You might just as well say that because three men can walk four miles an hour each man can walk twelve miles an hour

FREDERICK But that's just what I do say

WILLIAM Well, it's damned idiotic, that's all

FREDERICK No, but I mean exactly the opposite That's what *you* say You've got me confused now We'll have to start all over again

WILLIAM I shall never finish this story if you go on like this

FREDERICK It's a very important matter Let's get a pencil and a piece of paper and work it out We must get it right

WILLIAM For goodness' sake go and clean knives or something, and don't bother your head about things that are no concern of yours

FREDERICK Who's going to eat the steak?

WILLIAM You won't if you're not careful

FREDERICK If I'm careful I don't think I will.

WILLIAM [*Beginning to grow peevish*] Cooking has its rules like everything else, and it's just as little use arguing about them as arguing about women.

FREDERICK Now look here, if you cut that steak into three, would there be three pounds of steak or not?

WILLIAM Certainly not There'd be three steaks of one pound, and that's quite another matter

FREDERICK But it would be the same steak.

WILLIAM [*Emphatically*] It wouldn't be the same steak It would be an entirely different steak

FREDERICK Do you mean to tell me that if you had a steak of a hundred pounds you'd cook it for twenty-five hours?

WILLIAM Yes, and if I had a steak a thousand pounds I'd cook it for ten days

FREDERICK It seems an awful waste of gas

WILLIAM I don't care about that, it's logic

[*Enter VICTORIA*]

VICTORIA I really think it's too bad of you I've been ringing the bell for the last quarter of an hour There are two men in the house, and you neither of you pay the least attention

WILLIAM We were having an argument

FREDERICK Let me put it before you, Victoria

WILLIAM It has nothing to do with Victoria I'm the cook, and I won't have anyone come interfering in my kitchen

FREDERICK You must do something, Victoria The steak will be absolutely uneatable

VICTORIA I don't care I never eat steak

WILLIAM It's all you'll get for luncheon

VICTORIA I shan't be here for luncheon.

WILLIAM Why not?

VICTORIA Because—because Mr Leicester Paton has made me an offer of marriage and I have accepted it

FREDERICK. But you've got two husbands already, Victoria.

VICTORIA. I imagine you'll both be gentlemen enough to put no obstacle in the way of my getting my freedom

[*A ring is heard*]

FREDERICK Hulloo, who's that?

VICTORIA That is my solicitor.

FREDERICK. Your what?

VICTORIA I told him to come at one Go and open the door, Freddie, will you?

FREDERICK What the dickens does he want?

VICTORIA He's going to fix up my divorce

FREDERICK You're not letting the grass grow under your feet

[He goes out]

WILLIAM This is a desperate step you're taking, Victoria.

VICTORIA I had to do something You must see that it's quite impossible for a woman to live without servants. I had no one to do me up this morning

WILLIAM How on earth did you manage?

VICTORIA I had to put on something that didn't need doing up

WILLIAM That seems an adequate way out of the difficulty

VICTORIA It so happens that the one frock that didn't need doing up was the one frock I didn't want to wear

WILLIAM You look ravishing in it all the same

VICTORIA *[Rather stiffly]* I'd sooner you didn't pay me compliments, Bill

WILLIAM Why not?

VICTORIA Well, now that I'm engaged to Leicester Paton I don't think it's very good form

WILLIAM Have you quite made up your mind to divorce me?

VICTORIA Quite

WILLIAM In that case, I can almost look upon you as another man's wife.

VICTORIA What do you mean by that?

WILLIAM Only that I can make love to you without feeling a thundering ass

VICTORIA *[Smiling]* I'm not going to let you make love to me

WILLIAM You can't prevent me from telling you that you're the loveliest thing that ever turned a poor man's head.

VICTORIA I can close my ears

WILLIAM [*Taking her hands*] Impossible, for I shall hold your hands

VICTORIA I shall scream

WILLIAM. You can't, because I shall kiss your lips

[*He does so*]

VICTORIA Oh, Bill, what a pity it is you were ever my husband I'm sure you'd make a charming lover

WILLIAM I have often thought that is the better part

VICTORIA Take care They're just coming It would never do for my solicitor to find me in my husband's arms

WILLIAM It would be outrageous

[*FREDERICK ushers in the visitor* MR A B RAHAM
is a solicitor There is nothing more to be said about him]

VICTORIA How do you do, Mr Raham? Do you know my husbands?

MR RAHAM I'm pleased to meet you, gentlemen I dare say it would facilitate matters if I am told which of you is which, and which is the other

VICTORIA This is Major Cardew, my first husband, and this is my second husband, Major Lowndes

MR RAHAM Ah, that makes it quite clear Both Majors. Interesting coincidence

WILLIAM I suppose that Mrs Lowndes has put you in possession of the facts, Mr. Raham?

MR RAHAM I think so We had a long talk at my office yesterday.

FREDERICK. You can quite understand that it's a position of some delicacy for Mrs Cardew.

MR. RAHAM [*Puzzled*] Mrs Cardew? Where does Mrs Cardew come in?

FREDERICK This is Mrs Cardew.

MR. RAHAM Oh, I see what you mean That, in short, is the difficulty Is this lady Mrs Cardew or Mrs Lowndes? Well, the fact is, she has decided to be neither

VICTORIA I've just broken it to them.

WILLIAM You find us still staggering from the shock.

FREDERICK Stag^g-ring.

MR. RAHAM She has determined to divorce you both I have told her that this is not necessary, since she is obviously the wife of only one of you

VICTORIA [*Argumentatively*] In that case, what am I to the other?

MR. RAHAM Well, Mrs Cardew, or shall we say Lowndes? I hardly like to mention it to a lady, but if you'll excuse me saying so, you're his concubine

WILLIAM I rather like that, it sounds so damned Oriental

VICTORIA [*Indignantly*] I never heard of such a thing

WILLIAM Oh, Fatima, your face is like the full moon, and your eyes are like the eyes of a young gazelle Come, dance to me to the sound of the lute

VICTORIA Well, that settles it I shall divorce them both just to prove to everyone that they're both my husbands

FREDERICK I think it's just as well to take no risks

MR. RAHAM Do I understand that you two gentlemen are agreeable?

WILLIAM Speaking for myself, I am prepared to sacrifice my feelings, deep as they are, to the happiness of Victoria

MR. RAHAM Very nicely and feelingly put

VICTORIA He always was a gentleman.

MR. RAHAM. [*To FREDERICK.*] Now you, Major Cardew.

FREDERICK My name is Lowndes

MR RAHAM My mistake Of course you're Major Lowndes
I made a mental note of it when we were introduced
Cardew—camel-face Lowndes—litigation Pelmanism,
you know

FREDERICK I see It doesn't seem very effective, though

MR RAHAM Anyhow, that is neither here nor there Will
you give this lady the freedom she desires?

FREDERICK I will [*With a puzzled look*] When did I last
say those words? [*Remembering*] Of course, the marriage
service

MR RAHAM Well, so far so good I am under the im-
pression that when it comes to the point we shall not
need to take both you gentlemen into court, but I quite
agree with Mrs Lowndes-Cardew that it will save time
and trouble if we get up the case against both of you in
the same way Since you will neither of you defend
the case, there is no need for you to go to the expense
of legal advice, so I propose to go into the whole matter
with you now

VICTORIA You can feel quite easy about taking Mr Raham's
advice He has arranged more divorce cases than any
man in England

MR. RAHAM, I venture to say that there are few of the best
families in this country that haven't made use of my
services in one way or another Outraged husband,
deceived wife, co-respondent or intervener; it's hardly
likely that anyone who is anyone won't figure sooner
or later in one or other of these capacities. And although
it's I as says it, if he's wise he comes to me My maxim
has always been. Do it quickly; don't let's have a lot
of fuss and bother And, just to show you how my
system works, there are ladies for whom I've got a
divorce from three or four successive husbands, and

never a word of scandal has sullied the purity of their fair name.

WILLIAM You must be a very busy man.

MR. RAHAM I assure you, Major, I'm one of the busiest men in London

WILLIAM Fortunately, some marriages are happy.

MR. RAHAM Don't you believe it, Major Cardew There are no happy marriages But there are some that are tolerable.

VICTORIA You are a pessimist, Mr Raham. I have made both my husbands ideally happy

MR. RAHAM But I will come to the point Though, perhaps, it is hardly necessary, I will point out to you gentlemen what the law of the country needs in order to free a couple who, for reasons which merely concern themselves, have decided that they prefer to part company If a husband wishes to divorce his wife he need prove nothing but adultery, but the English law recognizes the natural polygamy of man, and when a wife desires to divorce her husband she must prove besides cruelty or desertion. Let us take these first Do you wish the cause of offence to be cruelty *or* desertion?

VICTORIA. Personally, I should prefer desertion.

WILLIAM Certainly I should very much dislike to be cruel to you, Victoria.

FREDERICK And you know I could never hurt a fly

MR. RAHAM Then we will settle on desertion. I think myself it is the more gentlemanly way, and besides, it is more easily proved The procedure is excessively simple Mrs Cardew-Lowndes will write you a letter, which I shall dictate, asking you to return to her—the usual phrase is “to make a home for her”—and you will refuse I propose that you should both give me your refusals now.

WILLIAM [*Surprised*] Before we've had the letter?

MR. RAHAM Precisely The letter which she will write, and which is read out in court, is so touching that on one occasion the husband, about to be divorced, was so moved that he immediately returned to his wife She was very angry indeed, and so now I invariably get the refusal first

WILLIAM It's so difficult to write an answer to a letter that hasn't been written

MR. RAHAM To meet that difficulty I have also prepared the replies Have you a fountain-pen?

WILLIAM Yes

MR. RAHAM [*Taking a piece of paper from his pocket-book and two sheets of paper*] If you will kindly write to my dictation, we will settle the matter at once Here is a sheet of paper

WILLIAM [*Taking it*] The address is—Hotel Majestic

MR. RAHAM You will see the point later Here is a piece for you, Major.

[*He gives it to FREDERICK*]

FREDERICK Do we both write the same letter?

MR. RAHAM Certainly not I have two letters that I generally make use of, and I propose that you should each of you write one of them The note of one is sorrow rather than anger The other is somewhat vituperative You can decide among yourselves which of you had better write which.

VICTORIA. They both habitually swore at me, but I think Bill's language was more varied.

MR. RAHAM That settles it. Are you ready, Major Lowndes?

FREDERICK [*Getting to ready write*] Fire away

MR. RAHAM: [*Dictating*] My dear Victoria, I have given your letter anxious consideration. If I thought there was any hope of our making a greater success of married life in

the future than we have in the past I should be the first to suggest that we should make one more attempt

WILLIAM Very touching

MR. RAHAM [*Continuing*] But I have regretfully come to the conclusion that to return to you would only be to cause a recurrence of the unhappy life from which I know that you have suffered no less than I. I am bound therefore definitely to refuse your request, I do not propose under any circumstances to return to you. Yours sincerely — Now sign your full name.

VICTORIA A very nice letter, Freddie. I shall always think pleasantly of you.

FREDERICK I have my points.

MR. RAHAM Now, Major Cardew, are you ready?

WILLIAM Quite.

MR. RAHAM My dear Victoria, I am in receipt of your letter asking me to return to you. Our life together has been a hell upon earth, and I have long realized that our marriage was a tragic mistake. You have sickened me with scenes and tortured me with jealousy. If you have tried to make me happy you have succeeded singularly ill. I trust that I shall never see you again, and nothing in the world will induce me ever to resume a life which I can only describe as a miserable degradation.

WILLIAM Thick, eh?

MR. RAHAM Now the crowning touch. Mark the irony of the polite ending. I beg to remain yours most sincerely — Now sign your name.

WILLIAM I've signed it.

MR. RAHAM Then that is settled. Now we only have to go into court, apply for a decree for restitution of conjugal rights, and six months later bring an action for divorce.

VICTORIA Six months later! But when shall I be free, then?

MR. RAHAM In about a year

VICTORIA Oh, but that won't do at all. I must have my freedom by—well, before the racing season ends, at all events

MR. RAHAM As soon as that³

VICTORIA The Derby, if possible Certainly by the Two Thousand Guineas

MR. RAHAM [*Shrugging his shoulders*] In that case the only thing is cruelty

VICTORIA It can't be helped They'll have to be cruel.

FREDERICK I don't like the idea, Victoria

VICTORIA Try and be a little unselfish for once, darling

WILLIAM I could never strike a woman

VICTORIA If I don't mind I don't see why you should

MR. RAHAM Cruelty has its advantages If it's properly witnessed it has a convincing air which desertion never has.

VICTORIA My mother will swear to anything

MR. RAHAM Servants are better The judges are often unduly suspicious of the mother-in-law's testimony Of course, one has to be careful Once, I remember, on my instructions the guilty husband hit the lady I was acting for in the jaw, which unfortunately knocked out her false teeth The gentleman she had arranged to marry happened to be present and he was so startled that he took the night train for the Continent and has never been heard of since.

WILLIAM. I'm happy to say that Victoria's teeth are all her own.

MR. RAHAM On another occasion I recommended a gentleman to take a stick and give his wife a few strokes with it I don't know if he got excited or what, but he gave her a regular hiding.

VICTORIA How awful!

MR. RAHAM It was indeed, for she threw her arms round his neck, and, saying she adored him, refused to have anything more to do with the divorce. She was going to marry a colonel in the army, and he was most offensive to me about it. I had to tell him that if he didn't leave my office I would send for the police.

VICTORIA You're dreadfully discouraging.

MR. RAHAM Oh, I merely tell you that to show you what may happen. But I have devised my own system and have never known it fail. I always arrange for three definite acts of cruelty. First at the dinner-table. Now, please listen to me carefully, gentlemen, and follow my instructions to the letter. When you have tasted your soup you throw down the spoon with a clatter and say Good Lord, this soup is uneatable. Can't you get a decent cook? You, madam, will answer. I do my best, darling. Upon which you, crying with a loud voice Take that, you damned fool, throw the plate straight at her. With a little ingenuity the lady can dodge the plate, and the only damage is done to the table-cloth.

VICTORIA I like that.

MR. RAHAM The second act is a little more violent. I suppose you have a revolver.

WILLIAM At all events, I can get one.

MR. RAHAM Having carefully removed the cartridges, you ring the bell for the servant, and just as she opens the door, you point it at the lady and say You lying devil, I'll kill you. Then you, madam, give a loud shriek, and cry to the maid. Oh, save me, save me.

VICTORIA I shall love doing that. So dramatic.

MR. RAHAM I think it's effective. When the servant tells her story in court it is very seldom that an audible thrill does not pass over the audience. They describe it in the papers as Sensation.

VICTORIA [*Practising*] Oh, save me Save me

MR. RAHAM Now we come to physical as opposed to moral cruelty It's as well to have two witnesses to this The gentleman takes the lady by the throat, at the same time hissing malevolently I'll throttle you if I swing for it, by God It's very important to leave a bruise so that the doctor, who should be sent for immediately, can swear to it

VICTORIA I don't like that part so much

MR. RAHAM Believe me, it's no more unpleasant than having a tooth stopped Now if one of you gentlemen would just go up to the lady we'll practise that I set great store on this particular point, and it's important that there should be no mistake Major Cardew, would you mind obliging?

WILLIAM Not at all

VICTORIA Be careful, Bill

WILLIAM Do I take her with both hands or only one?

MR. RAHAM Only one

[WILLIAM *seizes* VICTORIA *by the throat*]

MR. RAHAM That's right If he doesn't press hard enough kick him on the shins

WILLIAM If you do, Victoria, I swear I'll kick you back.

MR. RAHAM. That's the spirit You can't make a bruise without a little violence Now hiss

VICTORIA I'm choking

MR. RAHAM Hiss, hiss.

WILLIAM I'll throttle you if I swing for it, by God

MR. RAHAM Splendid! A real artist You're as good as divorced already

VICTORIA. He did say it well, didn't he? It really made my blood turn cold.

FREDERICK. Do you want me to do it too?

MR. RAHAM Now you've seen the idea I think it'll do if you just practise it once or twice with Major Cardew

FREDERICK Oh, all right

MR. RAHAM Now we come to a point trivial enough in itself, but essential in order to satisfy the requirements of our English law Adultery

WILLIAM That I think you can safely leave to us

MR. RAHAM By no means I think that would be most dangerous

WILLIAM Hang it all, man, human nature can surely be trusted there

MR. RAHAM We are not dealing with human nature, we are dealing with law

WILLIAM Law be blowed With the price of a supper in my pocket and an engaging manner I am prepared to supply you with all the evidence you want

MR. RAHAM I am shocked and horrified by your suggestion Do you expect a man in my position to connive at immorality

WILLIAM Immorality Well, there must be—shall we say a *souffron* of it—under the painful circumstances

MR. RAHAM Not at all I always arrange this part of the proceedings with the most scrupulous regard to propriety And before we go any further I should like to inform you that unless you are prepared to put out of your mind anything that is suggestive of indecent behaviour I shall decline to have anything more to do with the case

VICTORIA I think you must have a nasty mind, Bill.

WILLIAM But, my dear Victoria, I only wanted to make things easy for you. I apologize I put myself in your hands, Mr Raham.

MR. RAHAM Then please listen to me I will engage a suite

of rooms for you at the Hotel Majestic You will remember it was from there you wrote the letter in which you declined to return to your wife The judge never fails to remark on the coincidence On a date to be settled hereafter you will come to my office, where you will meet a lady

WILLIAM Do you mean to say you provide her too?

MR. RAHAM Certainly

FREDERICK What's she like?

MR. RAHAM A most respectable person I have employed her in these cases for many years

WILLIAM It sounds as though she made a business of it

MR. RAHAM She does

FREDERICK What!

MR. RAHAM Yes, she had the idea—a most ingenious one to my mind—that in these days of specialized professions there was great need for someone to undertake the duties of intervener That is the name by which the lady is known adultery with whom is the motive for divorce She has been employed by the best legal firms in London, and she has figured in practically all the fashionable divorces of the last fifteen years

WILLIAM You amaze me

MR. RAHAM I have felt it my duty to give her all the work I can on account of a paralyzed father, whom she supports entirely by her exertions

VICTORIA Not an unpleasant existence, I should imagine

MR. RAHAM If you knew her you would realize that no thought of that has ever entered her mind. A most unselfish, noble-minded woman

WILLIAM Does she make money by it?

MR. RAHAM Sufficient for her simple needs She only charges twenty guineas for her services.

WILLIAM I'm sure I could get it done for less

MR. RAHAM Not by a woman of any refinement

WILLIAM Well, well, with most of us it's only once in a lifetime

MR. RAHAM I will proceed You will fetch this lady at my office, and you will drive with her to the Hotel Majestic, where you will register as Major and Mrs Cardew You will be shown into the suite of rooms which I shall engage for you, and supper will be served in the sitting-room You will partake of this, and you will drink champagne

WILLIAM I should like to choose the brand myself

MR. RAHAM [*Magnanimously*] I have no objection to that

WILLIAM Thanks

MR. RAHAM Then you will play cards Miss Montmorency is a wonderful card-player She not only has an unparalleled knowledge of all games for two, but she can do a great number of tricks In this way you will find the night pass without tediousness, and in the morning you will ring for breakfast

FREDERICK I'm not sure if I should have much appetite for it.

MR. RAHAM I never mind my clients having brandy and soda instead It looks well in the waiter's evidence And after having paid your bill, you will take Miss Montmorency in a taxi-cab and deposit her at my office

WILLIAM It sounds a devil of a beano

FREDERICK I should like to see her first.

MR. RAHAM That is perfectly easy I know that ladies in these cases often like to see the intervener themselves Ladies are sometimes very suspicious, and even though they're getting rid of their husbands, they don't want them to—well, run any risks, and so I took the liberty of bringing Miss Montmorency with me She is waiting

in the taxi at the door, and if you like I will go and fetch her

FREDERICK At I'll go along and bring her down.

VICTORIA Is she the sort of person I should like to meet, Mr Raham?

MR RAHAM Oh, a perfect lady She comes from one of the best families in Shropshire

VICTORIA Do fetch her, Freddie Now I come to think of it, I should like to see her Men are so weak, and I shall be easier in my mind if I can be sure that these poor boys won't be led astray

[FREDERICK goes out]

WILLIAM Do you mean to say that with this evidence you will be able to get a divorce?

MR RAHAM Not a doubt of it I've got hundreds

WILLIAM I am only a soldier, and I dare say you will not be surprised if I am mentally deficient

MR RAHAM Not at all Not at all

WILLIAM Why on earth does such a state of things exist?

MR RAHAM Ah, that is a question which at one time I often asked myself I confess it seemed to me that when two married persons agreed to separate it was nobody's business but their own I think if they announced their determination before a justice of the peace, and were given six months to think the matter over, so that they might be certain they knew their minds, the marriage might then be dissolved without further trouble Many lies would never be told, much dirty linen would never be washed in public, and the sanctity of the marriage tie would be strengthened rather than lessened if the world were spared the spectacle of the sordid aspect the state which is called blessed too often wears There would be a notable saving of time, money and decency. But at last I hit upon the explanation.

WILLIAM What is it, then?

MR RAHAM If the law were always wise and reasonable it would be obeyed so easily that to obey the law would become an instinct. Now, it is not for the good of the community that the people should be too law-abiding. So our ancestors in the wisdom of their hearts devised certain laws which were vexatious or absurd, so that men should break them and therefore be led insensibly to break others.

WILLIAM But why is it not for the good of the community that the people should be too law-abiding?

MR RAHAM My dear sir, how else would the lawyers earn their living?

WILLIAM I had forgotten. I see your point.

MR RAHAM I hope I have convinced you.

WILLIAM Completely.

[At this moment FREDERICK comes in. He is pale and dishevelled. He staggers into the room like a man who has been exposed to a tremendous shock.]

FREDERICK *[Gasping]* Brandy! Brandy!

WILLIAM What's the matter?

FREDERICK Brandy!

[He fills almost half a glass with brandy and tosses it off. A voice is heard outside the door.]

MISS MONTMORENCY Is this the way?

MR RAHAM. Come straight in, Miss Montmorency.

[She enters. She is a spinster of uncertain age. She might be fifty-five. She looks rather like a hard-boiled egg, but there is in her gestures a languid grace. She speaks with a slight drawl, pronouncing her words with refinement, and her manner is a mixture of affability and condescension. She might be a governess in a very good family in the suburbs. Her respectability is portentous.]

MISS MONTMORENCY But this is the kitchen

[WILLIAM takes a long look at her, then gets up and goes to the brandy His hand shakes so violently that the neck of the bottle rattles against the glass He takes a long drink]

VICTORIA I'm afraid it's the only room in the house that's habitable at the moment

MISS MONTMORENCY To the practised observer the signs of domestic intimacy jump to the eye, as the French say

MR RAHAM Miss Montmorency—Mrs Frederick Lowndes

MISS MONTMORENCY [*Graciously*] I'm charmed to make your acquaintance The injured wife, I presume?

VICTORIA Er—yes

MISS MONTMORENCY So sad So sad I'm afraid the war is responsible for the rupture of many happy marriages. I'm booked up for weeks ahead So sad So sad

VICTORIA Do sit down, won't you

MISS MONTMORENCY Thank you Do you mind if I get out my note-book? I like to get everything perfectly clear, and my memory isn't what it was

VICTORIA Of course

MISS MONTMORENCY And now, which of these gentlemen is the erring husband?

VICTORIA Well, they both are.

MISS MONTMORENCY Oh, really And which are you going to marry after you've got your divorce.

VICTORIA Neither.

MISS MONTMORENCY: This is a very peculiar case, Mr Raham. When I saw these two gentlemen I naturally concluded that one of them was the husband Mrs Frederick Lowndes was discarding and the other the husband she was acquiring The eternal triangle, you know.

WILLIAM In this case the triangle is four-sided

MISS MONTMORENCY Oh, how very peculiar

MR RAHAM We see a lot of strange things in our business,
Miss Montmorency

MISS MONTMORENCY To whom do you say it, as the
French say

VICTORIA I don't want you to think that I've been at all
light or careless, but the fact is, through no fault of
my own, they're both my husbands

MISS MONTMORENCY [*Taking it as a matter of course*] Oh,
really How very interesting And which are you
divorcing?

VICTORIA I'm divorcing them both

MISS MONTMORENCY Oh, I see Very sad Very sad

WILLIAM We're taking as cheerful a view of it as we can

MISS MONTMORENCY Ah, yes, that's what I say to my
clients Courage Courage

FREDERICK [*With a start*] When?

VICTORIA Be quiet, Freddie

MISS MONTMORENCY I think I ought to tell you at once that
I shouldn't like to misconduct myself—I use the technical
expression—with both these gentlemen

MR RAHAM Oh, Miss Montmorency, a woman of your
experience isn't going to strain at a gnat

MISS MONTMORENCY No, but I shouldn't like to swallow
a camel.

MR RAHAM. We shall be generous, Miss Montmorency.

MISS MONTMORENCY I have to think of my self-respect.
One gentleman is business, but two would be debauchery.

MR RAHAM Mrs Lowndes is anxious to put this matter
through as quickly as possible.

MISS MONTMORENCY I dare say my friend Mrs. Onslow
Jervis would oblige if I asked her as a personal favour.

VICTORIA Are you sure she can be trusted?

MISS MONTMORENCY Oh, she's a perfect lady and most respectable. She's the widow of a clergyman, and she has two sons in the army. They've done so well in the war.

MR RAHAM Unless we can get Miss Montmorency to reconsider her decision I'm afraid we shall have to put up with Mrs Onslow Jervis.

MISS MONTMORENCY I am adamant, Mr Raham. Adamant.

FREDERICK I'm all for Mrs Onslow Jervis personally.

MISS MONTMORENCY Then you fall to me, Major. I didn't catch your name.

WILLIAM Cardew.

MISS MONTMORENCY I hope you play cards.

WILLIAM Sometimes.

MISS MONTMORENCY I'm a great card-player. Piquet, écarté, cribbage, double dummy, baccarat, bezique, I don't mind what I play. It's such a relief to find a gentleman who's fond of cards.

WILLIAM Otherwise I daresay the night seems rather long.

MISS MONTMORENCY Oh, not to me, you know. I'm such a student of human nature. But my gentlemen begin to grow a little restless when I've talked to them for six or seven hours.

WILLIAM I can hardly believe it.

MISS MONTMORENCY One gentleman actually said he wanted to go to bed, but, of course, I told him that would never do.

VICTORIA Forgive my asking—you know what men are—do they never attempt to take any liberties with you?

MISS MONTMORENCY Oh no. If you're a lady you can always keep a man in his place. And Mr Raham only takes the very best sort of divorces. The only unpleasantness I've ever had was with a gentleman sent to me by a firm of solicitors in a cathedral city. I took a dislike to him the

first moment I saw him, and when he refused to drink anything at supper but ginger-beer I was on my guard A cold sensualist, I said to myself

VICTORIA Oh, I know so well what you mean

MISS MONTMORENCY He had no sooner finished his second bottle of ginger-beer than, without any warning at all, he said I am going to kiss you You could have heard a pin drop I pretended to think he was joking, so I said We have met for business rather than pleasure And what d'you think he answered? He said This is one of the rare occasions on which one can combine the two I didn't lose my presence of mind I expostulated with him I told him I was a woman and defenceless, and he said That's just it Not a gentleman, of course, not in the best sense of the word I appealed to his better nature But all in vain I didn't know what to do, when suddenly I had an inspiration I rushed to the door and called in the detective who was watching us He protected me

MR RAHAM It was risky, Miss Montmorency The judge might have said there was collusion

MISS MONTMORENCY Necessity knows no law, Mr Raham, as those dreadful Germans say, and I was terribly frightened

WILLIAM I can assure you, Miss Montmorency, that you need have no fear that I shall take advantage of your delicate position.

MISS MONTMORENCY Of course, you will divest yourself of none of your raiment

WILLIAM On the contrary, I propose to put on an extra suit of clothes.

MISS MONTMORENCY Oh, Mr. Raham, please don't forget that I only drink Pommery. In the Twickenham divorce they sent up Pol Roger, and Pol Roger always gives me

indigestion. Fortunately the dear Marquis, who suffers from dyspepsia, had some pepsin tablets with him or I don't know what I should have done

MR RAHAM I'll make a note of it at once

MISS MONTMORENCY 1906 [To WILLIAM] I'm sure we shall have a delightful night I can see that we have much in common

WILLIAM It's too good of you to say so

MISS MONTMORENCY [To FREDERICK] And I know you'll like Mrs Onslow Jervis A perfect lady She has such charm of manner So much ease You can see that she did a lot of entertaining when her husband was Vicar of Clacton They have a very nice class of people at Clacton

FREDERICK I shall be charmed to meet her

MISS MONTMORENCY You will take care not to be at all risqué, as the French say, in your conversation, won't you? Of course, she's a woman of the world, but as the widow of the Vicar of Clacton she feels it only due to herself to be a little particular

FREDERICK I promise you I'll be very careful

MISS MONTMORENCY I don't know what Mr Raham would say to our sharing a suite We could play bridge She's a very fine bridge-player, and we only play threepence a hundred, because in her position she can hardly gamble, can she?

MR RAHAM I always like to oblige you, Miss Montmorency, but I hardly think that arrangement would do You know how fussy the judges are. We might hit upon one of them who saw nothing in it

MISS MONTMORENCY: I know. They're tiresome, silly creatures

MR RAHAM: Why, the other day I came across one who wouldn't believe the worst had happened when a man

and a woman, not related in any way, mind you, were proved to have been alone in a room together for three-quarters of an hour

MISS MONTMORENCY Oh, well, let us take no risks Business is business It must be you and me alone then, Major Cardew You will let me know in good time when you fix the fatal night I'm very much booked up just now

MR RAHAM Of course, we will do everything to suit your convenience, Miss Montmorency And now, Mrs Lowndes, since we have settled everything, I think Miss Montmorency and I will go

VICTORIA I can't think of anything else

MISS MONTMORENCY Excuse my taking the liberty, Mrs Frederick Lowndes, but after your great trouble is over should you be wanting any face massage, may I give you my card ?

VICTORIA Oh, do you do face massage?

MISS MONTMORENCY Only for ladies who are personally recommended to me Here is my card

VICTORIA [*Looking at it*] Esmeralda

MISS MONTMORENCY Yes, it's a pretty name, isn't it? I also make the Esmeralda cream The Marchioness of Twickenham's face was simply ravaged when she was divorcing the Marquis, and, believe me, after a course of twelve treatments you wouldn't have known her

VICTORIA Of course, all this sort of thing is a great nervous shock.

MISS MONTMORENCY. Oh, I know And there's nothing like face massage for soothing the nerves.

VICTORIA I'll certainly keep your card.

MISS MONTMORENCY Good-bye, then. [*To WILLIAM*] I'm not going to say good-bye to you, but au revoir

WILLIAM Believe me, I look forward to our next meeting

MR RAHAM Good morning, Mrs. Lowndes. Good

morning [*Moving towards the door that leads into the area*]
Shall we go out this way?

MISS MONTMORENCY [*Just a little taken aback*] The area
steps? Oh, very well. It's so quaint and old-fashioned
I always think a lady if she is a lady can do anything

[*She gives a gracious bow and goes out, followed by*
MR. RAHAM

WILLIAM This is a bit of all right that you've let us in for,
Victoria

VICTORIA Well, darling, it's the only thing I've ever asked
you to do for me in all my life, so you needn't complain

WILLIAM I will bear it like a martyr

VICTORIA Now, the only thing left is for me to bid you
good-bye

FREDERICK Already?

VICTORIA You must understand that under the circum-
stances it wouldn't be quite nice for me to stay here
Besides, without servants, it's beastly uncomfortable

WILLIAM Won't you even stay to luncheon?

VICTORIA I don't think I will, thanks. I think I shall get
a better one at mother's

FREDERICK Oh, are you going there?

VICTORIA Where else do you expect a woman to go in a
crisis like this?

WILLIAM I should think the steak was about done, Freddie

FREDERICK. Oh, I'd give it another hour or two to make
sure

VICTORIA. Of course, I realize that it's a painful moment
for both of you, but as you say, we shan't make it any
easier by dragging it out

WILLIAM True.

VICTORIA Good-bye, Bill. I forgive you everything, and
I hope we shall always be good friends

WILLIAM Good-bye, Victoria I hope this will not be by any means your last marriage.

VICTORIA When everything is settled you must come and dine with us I'm sure you'll find that Leicester has the best wines and cigars that money can buy

[She turns to him an indifferent cheek]

WILLIAM *[Kissing it]* Good-bye

VICTORIA And now, Freddie, it's your turn Now that there's nothing more between us you might give me back that pin I gave you

FREDERICK *[Taking it out of his tie]* Here you are.

VICTORIA And there was a cigarette-case

FREDERICK *[Giving it her]* Take it.

VICTORIA They say jewellery has gone up tremendously in value since the war I shall give Leicester a cigarette-case as a wedding present

WILLIAM You always do, Victoria

VICTORIA Men like it Good-bye, Freddie dear I shall always have a pleasant recollection of you

[She turns the other cheek to him]

FREDERICK Good-bye, Victoria

WILLIAM Would you like a taxi?

VICTORIA No, thanks I think the exercise will do me good

[She goes out, and is seen tripping up the area steps]

FREDERICK A wonderful woman

WILLIAM I shall never regret having married her Now let's have lunch

FREDERICK I wish I looked forward to it as much as you do

WILLIAM Dear old man, has this affecting scene taken away your appetite?

FREDERICK It's not the appetite I'm doubtful about. It's the steak

WILLIAM Oh, don't you worry yourself about that I'll just dish up [*He goes over to the stove and tries to get the steak out of the frying-pan*] Come out, you great fat devil It won't come out

FREDERICK That's your trouble

WILLIAM [*Bringing the frying-pan to the table*] Oh, well, we can eat it just as well out of the frying-pan Shall I carve it?

FREDERICK [*Sitting down*] Please

[*WILLIAM takes a knife and starts to cut the steak It won't cut He applies force The steak resists stealthily A little surprised, WILLIAM puts somewhat more strength into it He makes no impression He begins to grow vexed He starts to struggle He sets his teeth It is all in vain The sweat pours from his brow FREDERICK watches him in gloomy silence At last in a passion WILLIAM throws down the knife*

WILLIAM [*Furiously*] Why don't you say something, you fool?

FREDERICK [*Gently*] Shall I go and fetch my little hatchet?

WILLIAM [*Attacking the steak again angrily with the knife*] I know my theory's right If you cook a pound of meat a quarter of an hour you must cook three pounds of meat three quarters of an hour

[*A boy, carrying a large, square, covered basket, is seen coming down the area steps He knocks at the door*

FREDERICK Hulloa, who's this? [*He goes to the door and opens*] What can I do for you, my son?

CLARENCE Does Mrs. Frederick Lowndes live herer?

FREDERICK In a manner of speaking.

CLARENCE [*Coming in*] From the Ritz Hotel.

FREDERICK What's that? Walk right in, my boy. Put it on the table.

WILLIAM [*Looking at the label*] With Mr Leicester Paton's compliments

FREDERICK It's luncheon.

CLARENCE I was told to give the basket to the lady personally

FREDERICK That's all right, my boy

CLARENCE If the lady's not here I'm to take it back again

WILLIAM [*Promptly*] She's just coming downstairs [*He goes to the door and calls*] Victoria, my darling, that kind Mr Leicester Paton has sent you a little light refreshment from the Ritz

FREDERICK There's half-a-crown for you, my lad Now, you hop it quick

CLARENCE Thank you, sir.

[*He goes out*]

FREDERICK Now you can eat the steak if you like I'm going to eat Victoria's luncheon

WILLIAM It's a damned unscrupulous thing to do I'll join you

[*They hurriedly begin to unpack the basket*]

FREDERICK [*Taking off a cover*] What's here? Chicken en casserole?

WILLIAM That's all right. Here, give me that bottle and see me open it

[*He takes out a bottle of champagne and proceeds to open it*]

FREDERICK *Pate de foie gras* Good Caviare? No Smoked salmon Stout fellow, Mr Leicester Paton.

WILLIAM Don't stand there staring at it Get it out.

FREDERICK This is a regular beano.

WILLIAM I'm beginning to think the wangler won the war after all.

FREDERICK *Mousse au jambon* He's got some idea of
Victoria's appetite

WILLIAM My dear fellow, love is always blind

FREDERICK Thank God for it, that's all I say How's that
cork going?

WILLIAM Half a mo It's just coming

FREDERICK This is what I call a nice little snack Dear
Victoria, she was a good sort

WILLIAM In her way

FREDERICK But give me *pâté de foie gras*

WILLIAM [*Getting the bottle opened*] Pop Hand over your
glass

FREDERICK Here you are I'm as hungry as a trooper

WILLIAM Before we start, I want you to drink a toast

FREDERICK I'll drink anything

WILLIAM [*Holding up his glass*] Victoria's third husband

FREDERICK God help him!

WILLIAM And for us—liberty

[*As they drain their glasses the curtain falls quickly*]

THE END

THE CIRCLE

A COMEDY

in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

CLIVE CHAMPION-CHENEY
ARNOLD CHAMPION-CHENEY, M P
LORD PORTEOUS
EDWARD LUTON
LADY CATHERINE CHAMPION-CHENEY
ELIZABETH
MRS SHENSTONE
A FOOTMAN AND A BUTLER

*The action takes place at Aston-Adey, Arnold
Champion-Cheney's house in Dorset.*

THE CIRCLE

THE FIRST ACT

The Scene is a stately drawing-room at Aston-Adey, with fine pictures on the walls and Georgian furniture. Aston-Adey has been described, with many illustrations, in Country Life. It is not a house, but a place. Its owner takes a great pride in it, and there is nothing in the room which is not of the period. Through the French windows at the back can be seen the beautiful gardens which are one of the features.

It is a fine summer morning.

ARNOLD comes in. *He is a man of about thirty-five, tall and good-looking, fair, with a clean-cut, sensitive face. He has a look that is intellectual, but somewhat bloodless. He is very well dressed.*

ARNOLD [*Calling*] Elizabeth! [*He goes to the window and calls again*] Elizabeth! [*He rings the bell. While he is waiting he gives a look round the room. He slightly alters the position of one of the chairs. He takes an ornament from the chimney-piece and blows the dust from it.*]

[*A FOOTMAN comes in.*

Oh, George! See if you can find Mrs. Cheney, and ask her if she'd be good enough to come here.

FOOTMAN Very good, sir.

[*The FOOTMAN turns to go.*

ARNOLD Who is supposed to look after this room?

FOOTMAN I don't know, sir.

ARNOLD: I wish when they dust they'd take care to replace the things exactly as they were before.

FOOTMAN Yes, sir

ARNOLD [*Dismissing him*] All right

[*The FOOTMAN goes out He goes again to the window and calls*

ARNOLD Elizabeth! [*He sees MRS SHENSTONE*] Oh, Anna, do you know where Elizabeth is?

[*MRS SHENSTONE comes in from the garden She is a woman of forty, pleasant and of elegant appearance*

ANNA Isn't she playing tennis?

ARNOLD No, I've been down to the tennis court Something very tiresome has happened

ANNA Oh?

ARNOLD I wonder where the deuce she is

ANNA When do you expect Lord Porteous and Lady Kitty?

ARNOLD They're motoring down in time for luncheon

ANNA Are you sure you want me to be here? It's not too late yet, you know I can have my things packed and catch a train for somewhere or other

ARNOLD No, of course we want you It'll make it so much easier if there are people here It was exceedingly kind of you to come

ANNA Oh, nonsense!

ARNOLD And I think it was a good thing to have Teddie Luton down

ANNA He is so breezy, isn't he?

ARNOLD Yes, that's his great asset I don't know that he's very intelligent, but, you know, there are occasions when you want a bull in a china shop. I sent one of the servants to find Elizabeth

ANNA I daresay she's putting on her shoes. She and Teddie were going to have a single

ARNOLD. It can't take all this time to change one's shoes.

ANNA [*With a smile*] One can't change one's shoes without powdering one's nose, you know

[*ELIZABETH comes in She is a very pretty creature in the early twenties She wears a light summer frock*

ARNOLD My dear, I've been hunting for you everywhere
What *have* you been doing?

ELIZABETH Nothing! I've been standing on my head

ARNOLD My father's here

ELIZABETH [*Startled*] Where?

ARNOLD At the cottage He arrived last night.

ELIZABETH Damn!

ARNOLD [*Good-humouredly*] I wish you wouldn't say that, Elizabeth

ELIZABETH If you're not going to say Damn when a thing's damnable, when are you going to say Damn?

ARNOLD I should have thought you could say, Oh, bother! or something like that

ELIZABETH But that wouldn't express my sentiments
Besides, at that speech day when you were giving away the prizes you said there were no synonyms in the English language

ANNA [*Smiling*] Oh, Elizabeth! It's very unfair to expect a politician to live in private up to the statements he makes in public

ARNOLD I'm always willing to stand by anything I've said
There *are* no synonyms in the English language

ELIZABETH In that case I shall be regretfully forced to continue to say Damn whenever I feel like it

[*EDWARD LUTON shows himself at the window He is an attractive youth in flannels.*

TEDDIE I say, what about this tennis?

ELIZABETH Come in We're having a scene.

TEDDIE [*Entering*] How splendid! What about?

ELIZABETH The English language

TEDDIE Don't tell me you've been splitting your infinitives

ARNOLD [*With the shadow of a frown*] I wish you'd be serious,

ELIZABETH The situation is none too pleasant

ANNA I think Teddie and I had better make ourselves scarce

ELIZABETH Nonsense! You're both in it If there's going to be any unpleasantness we want your moral support That's why we asked you to come

TEDDIE And I thought I'd been asked for my blue eyes

ELIZABETH Vain beast! And they happen to be brown.

TEDDIE Is anything up?

ELIZABETH Arnold's father arrived last night

TEDDIE Did he, by Jove! I thought he was in Paris

ARNOLD So did we all He told me he'd be there for the next month

ANNA Have you seen him?

ARNOLD No! He rang me up It's a mercy he had a telephone put in the cottage It would have been a pretty kettle of fish if he'd just walked in

ELIZABETH Did you tell him Lady Catherine was coming?

ARNOLD Of course not I was flabbergasted to know he was here. And then I thought we'd better talk it over first.

ELIZABETH Is he coming along here?

ARNOLD Yes He suggested it, and I couldn't think of any excuse to prevent him.

TEDDIE. Couldn't you put the other people off?

ARNOLD They're coming by car. They may be here any minute. It's too late to do that

ELIZABETH Besides, it would be beastly.

ARNOLD I knew it was silly to have them here Elizabeth insisted

ELIZABETH After all, she *is* your mother, Arnold

ARNOLD That meant precious little to her when she—went away You can't imagine it means very much to me now

ELIZABETH It's thirty years ago It seems so absurd to bear malice after all that time

ARNOLD I don't bear malice, but the fact remains that she did me the most irreparable harm I can find no excuse for her

ELIZABETH Have you ever tried to?

ARNOLD My dear Elizabeth, it's no good going over all that again The facts are lamentably simple She had a husband who adored her, a wonderful position, all the money she could want, and a child of five And she ran away with a married man

ELIZABETH Lady Porteous is not a very attractive woman, Arnold [*To ANNA*] Do you know her?

ANNA [*Smiling*] Forbidding is the word, I think

ARNOLD If you're going to make little jokes about it, I have nothing more to say

ANNA I'm sorry, Arnold

ELIZABETH Perhaps your mother couldn't help herself—if she was in love?

ARNOLD And had no sense of honour, duty, or decency? Oh, yes, under those circumstances you can explain a great deal

ELIZABETH That's not a very pretty way to speak of your mother

ARNOLD I can't look on her as my mother

ELIZABETH What you can't get over is that she didn't think of you Some of us are more mother and some of us more woman It gives me a little thrill when I think that

she loved that man so much. She sacrificed her name, her position and her child to him

ARNOLD You really can't expect the said child to have any great affection for the mother who treated him like that

ELIZABETH No, I don't think I do. But I think it's a pity after all these years that you shouldn't be friends

ARNOLD I wonder if you realise what it was to grow up under the shadow of that horrible scandal. Everywhere, at school, and at Oxford, and afterwards in London, I was always the son of Lady Kitty Cheney. Oh, it was cruel, cruel

ELIZABETH Yes, I know, Arnold. It was beastly for you

ARNOLD It would have been bad enough if it had been an ordinary case, but the position of the people made it ten times worse. My father was in the House then, and Porteous—he hadn't succeeded to the title—was in the House too, he was Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and he was very much in the public eye

ANNA My father always used to say he was the ablest man in the party. Every one was expecting him to be Prime Minister

ARNOLD You can imagine what a boon it was to the British public. They hadn't had such a treat for a generation. The most popular song of the day was about my mother. Did you ever hear it? "Naughty Lady Kitty. Thought it such a pity."

ELIZABETH [*Interrupting*] Oh, Arnold, don't!

ARNOLD And then they never let people forget them. If they'd lived quietly in Florence and not made a fuss the scandal would have died down. But those constant actions between Lord and Lady Porteous kept on reminding everyone

TEDDIE What were they having actions about?

ARNOLD Of course my father divorced his wife, but Lady

Porteous refused to divorce Porteous. He tried to force her by refusing to support her and turning her out of her house, and heaven knows what. They were constantly wrangling in the law courts.

ANNA I think it was monstrous of Lady Porteous.

ARNOLD She knew he wanted to marry my mother, and she hated my mother. You can't blame her.

ANNA It must have been very difficult for them.

ARNOLD That's why they've lived in Florence. Porteous has money. They found people there who were willing to accept the situation.

ELIZABETH This is the first time they've ever come to England.

ARNOLD My father will have to be told, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH Yes.

ANNA [*To ELIZABETH*] Has he ever spoken to you about Lady Kitty?

ELIZABETH Never.

ARNOLD I don't think her name has passed his lips since she ran away from this house thirty years ago.

TEDDIE Oh, they lived here?

ARNOLD Naturally. There was a house-party, and one evening neither Porteous nor my mother came down to dinner. The rest of them waited. They couldn't make it out. My father sent up to my mother's room, and a note was found on the pin-cushion.

ELIZABETH [*With a faint smile*] That's what they did in the Dark Ages.

ARNOLD I think he took a dislike to this house from that horrible night. He never lived here again, and when I married he handed the place over to me. He just has a cottage now on the estate that he comes to when he feels inclined.

ELIZABETH It's been very nice for us

ARNOLD I owe everything to my father I don't think he'll ever forgive me for asking these people to come here

ELIZABETH I'm going to take all the blame on myself, Arnold

ARNOLD [*Irritably*] The situation was embarrassing enough anyhow I don't know how I ought to treat them

ELIZABETH Don't you think that'll settle itself when you see them

ARNOLD After all, they're my guests I shall try and behave like a gentleman

ELIZABETH I wouldn't We haven't got central heating

ARNOLD [*Taking no notice*] Will she expect me to kiss her?

ELIZABETH [*With a smile*] Surely

ARNOLD It always makes me uncomfortable when people are effusive

ANNA But I can't understand why you never saw her before.

ARNOLD I believe she tried to see me when I was little, but my father thought it better she shouldn't

ANNA Yes, but when you were grown up?

ARNOLD She was always in Italy I never went to Italy

ELIZABETH It seems to me so pathetic that if you saw one another in the street you wouldn't recognise each other

ARNOLD Is it my fault?

ELIZABETH You've promised to be very gentle with her and very kind

ARNOLD The mistake was asking Porteous to come too It looks as though we condoned the whole thing And how am I to treat him? Am I to shake him by the hand and slap him on the back? He absolutely ruined my father's life

ELIZABETH [*Smiling*] How much would you give for a nice motor accident that prevented them from coming?

ARNOLD I let you persuade me against my better judgment, and I've regretted it ever since

ELIZABETH [*Good-humouredly*] I think it's very lucky that Anna and Teddie are here I don't foresee a very successful party

ARNOLD I'm going to do my best I gave you my promise and I shall keep it But I can't answer for my father

ANNA Here is your father

[*MR CHAMPION-CHENEY shows himself at one of the french windows*]

C-C May I come in through the window, or shall I have myself announced by a supercilious flunkey?

ELIZABETH Come in We've been expecting you

C-C Impatiently, I hope, my dear child

[*MR CHAMPION-CHENEY is a tall man in the early sixties, spare, with a fine head of grey hair and an intelligent, somewhat ascetic face He is very carefully dressed He is a man who makes the most of himself He bears his years jauntily He kisses ELIZABETH and then holds out his hand to ARNOLD*]

ELIZABETH We thought you'd be in Paris for another month

C-C How are you, Arnold? I always reserve to myself the privilege of changing my mind It's the only one elderly gentlemen share with pretty women

ELIZABETH You know Anna

C-C [*Shaking hands with her*] Of course I do How very nice to see you here! Are you staying long?

ANNA As long as I'm welcome

ELIZABETH And this is Mr Luton.

C-C How do you do? Do you play bridge?

LUTON I do

C-C Capital Do you declare without top honours?

LUTON Never

C-C Of such is the kingdom of heaven I see that you are
a good young man

LUTON But, like the good in general, I am poor

C-C Never mind, if your principles are right, you can
play ten shillings a hundred without danger I never
play less, and I never play more

ARNOLD And you—are you going to stay long, father?

C-C To luncheon, if you'll have me

[ARNOLD gives ELIZABETH a harassed look

ELIZABETH That'll be jolly

ARNOLD I didn't mean that Of course you're going to
stay for luncheon I meant, how long are you going to
stay down here?

C-C A week.

[There is a moment's pause Everyone but CHAMPION-
CHENEY is slightly embarrassed

TEDDIE I think we'd better chuck our tennis

ELIZABETH Yes I want my father-in-law to tell me what
they're wearing in Paris this week

TEDDIE. I'll go and put the rackets away

[TEDDIE goes out.

ARNOLD It's nearly one o'clock, Elizabeth

ELIZABETH I didn't know it was so late.

ANNA [To ARNOLD] I wonder if I can persuade you to
take a turn in the garden before luncheon.

ARNOLD [Jumping at the idea] I'd love it.

[ANNA goes out of the window, and as he follows her he
stops irresolutely

I want you to look at this chair I've just got I think it's rather good

C-C Charming

ARNOLD About 1750, I should say Good design, isn't it? It hasn't been restored or anything

C-C Very pretty

ARNOLD I think it was a good buy, don't you?

C-C Oh, my dear boy, you know I'm entirely ignorant about these things

ARNOLD It's exactly my period . I shall see you at luncheon, then

[He follows ANNA through the window]

C-C Who is that young man?

ELIZABETH Mr Luton He's only just been demobilised He's the manager of a rubber estate in the F M S

C-C And what are the F M S when they're at home?

ELIZABETH The Federated Malay States He joined up at the beginning of the war He's just going back there

C-C And why have we been left alone in this very marked manner?

ELIZABETH Have we? I didn't notice it

C-C I suppose it's difficult for the young to realise that one may be old without being a fool

ELIZABETH I never thought you that Everyone knows you're very intelligent

C-C They certainly ought to by now I've told them often enough Are you a little nervous?

ELIZABETH Let me feel my pulse *[She puts her finger on her wrist]* It's perfectly regular

C-C When I suggested staying to luncheon Arnold looked exactly like a dose of castor oil

ELIZABETH I wish you'd sit down.

C-C. Will it make it easier for you? [*He takes a chair*]
You have evidently something very disagreeable to say to me

ELIZABETH You won't be cross with me?

C-C How old are you?

ELIZABETH Twenty-five.

C-C I'm never cross with a woman under thirty.

ELIZABETH Oh, then, I've got ten years.

C-C Mathematics?

ELIZABETH No Paint

C-C Well?

ELIZABETH [*Reflectively*] I think it would be easier if I sat on your knees

C-C That is a pleasing taste of yours, but you must take care not to put on weight

[*She sits down on his knees*]

ELIZABETH Am I boney?

C-C On the contrary I'm listening

ELIZABETH Lady Catherine's coming here.

C-C Who's Lady Catherine?

ELIZABETH Your—Arnold's mother.

C-C Is she?

[*He withdraws himself a little and ELIZABETH gets up*]

ELIZABETH You mustn't blame Arnold It's my fault I insisted He was against it I nagged him till he gave way And then I wrote and asked her to come

C-C I didn't know you knew her

ELIZABETH I don't But I heard she was in London. She's staying at Claridge's It seemed so heartless not to take the smallest notice of her

C-C When is she coming?

ELIZABETH We're expecting her in time for luncheon.

C-C As soon as that? I understand the embarrassment

ELIZABETH You see, we never expected you to be here
You said you'd be in Paris for another month

C-C My dear child, this is your house There's no reason
why you shouldn't ask whom you please to stay with
you

ELIZABETH After all, whatever her faults, she's Arnold's
mother It seemed so unnatural that they should never
see one another My heart ached for that poor lonely
woman

C-C I never heard that she was lonely, and she certainly
isn't poor

ELIZABETH And there's something else I couldn't ask her
by herself It would have been so—so insulting I asked
Lord Porteous, too

C-C I see

ELIZABETH I daresay you'd rather not meet them

C-C I daresay they'd rather not meet me I shall get a
capital luncheon at the cottage I've noticed you always
get the best food if you come in unexpectedly and have
the same as they're having in the servants' hall

ELIZABETH No one's ever talked to me about Lady Kitty
It's always been a subject that everyone has avoided
I've never even seen a photograph of her

C-C The house was full of them when she left I think
I told the butler to throw them in the dust-bin. She was
very much photographed

ELIZABETH Won't you tell me what she was like?

C-C She was very like you, Elizabeth, only she had dark
hair instead of red

ELIZABETH Poor dear! It must be quite white now

C-C I daresay She was a pretty little thing

ELIZABETH But she was one of the great beauties of her day They say she was lovely

C-C She had the most adorable little nose, like yours

ELIZABETH D'you like my nose?

C-C And she was very dainty, with a beautiful little figure very light on her feet She was like a *marquise* in an old French comedy Yes, she was lovely

ELIZABETH And I'm sure she's lovely still

C-C She's no chicken, you know

ELIZABETH You can't expect me to look at it as you and Arnold do When you've loved as she's loved you may grow old, but you grow old beautifully

C-C You're very romantic

ELIZABETH If everyone hadn't made such a mystery of it I daresay I shouldn't feel as I do I know she did a great wrong to you and a great wrong to Arnold I'm willing to acknowledge that

C-C I'm sure it's very kind of you

ELIZABETH But she loved and she dared Romance is such an illusive thing You read of it in books, but it's seldom you see it face to face I can't help it if it thrills me

C-C I am painfully aware that the husband in these cases is not a romantic object

ELIZABETH She had the world at her feet You were rich She was a figure in society And she gave up everything for love

C-C [*Dryly*] I'm beginning to suspect it wasn't only for her sake and for Arnold's that you asked her to come here

ELIZABETH I seem to know her already I think her face is a little sad, for a love like that doesn't leave you gay, it leaves you grave, but I think her pale face is unlined. It's like a child's

C-C My dear, how you let your imagination run away with you!

ELIZABETH I imagine her slight and frail

C-C Frail, certainly

ELIZABETH With beautiful thin hands and white hair I've pictured her so often in that Renaissance palace that they live in, with old masters on the walls and lovely carved things all round, sitting in a black silk dress with old lace round her neck and old-fashioned diamonds. You see, I never knew my mother, she died when I was a baby. You can't confide in aunts with huge families of their own. I want Arnold's mother to be a mother to me. I've got so much to say to her.

C-C Are you happy with Arnold?

ELIZABETH Why shouldn't I be?

C-C Why haven't you got any babies?

ELIZABETH Give us a little time. We've only been married three years.

C-C I wonder what Hughie is like now?

ELIZABETH Lord Porteous?

C-C He wore his clothes better than any man in London. You know he'd have been Prime Minister if he'd remained in politics.

ELIZABETH What was he like then?

C-C He was a nice-looking fellow. Fine horseman. I suppose there was something very fascinating about him. Yellow hair and blue eyes, you know. He had a very good figure. I liked him. I was his parliamentary secretary. He was Arnold's godfather.

ELIZABETH I know.

C-C I wonder if he ever regrets.

ELIZABETH I wouldn't.

C-C. Well, I must be strolling back to my cottage.

ELIZABETH You're not angry with me?

C-C Not a bit,

[She puts up her face for him to kiss. He kisses her on both cheeks and then goes out. In a moment TEDDIE is seen at the window.]

TEDDIE I saw the old blighter go

ELIZABETH Come in

TEDDIE Everything all right?

ELIZABETH Oh, quite, as far as he's concerned. He's going to keep out of the way

TEDDIE Was it beastly?

ELIZABETH No, he made it very easy for me. He's a nice old thing

TEDDIE You were rather scared

ELIZABETH A little. I am still. I don't know why

TEDDIE I guessed you were. I thought I'd come and give you a little moral support. It's ripping here, isn't it?

ELIZABETH It is rather nice

TEDDIE It'll be jolly to think of it when I'm back in the F M S

ELIZABETH Aren't you homesick sometimes?

TEDDIE Oh, everyone is now and then, you know.

ELIZABETH You could have got a job in England if you'd wanted to, couldn't you?

TEDDIE Oh, but I love it out there. England's ripping to come back to, but I couldn't live here now. It's like a woman you're desperately in love with as long as you don't see her, but when you're with her she maddens you so that you can't bear her

ELIZABETH *[Smiling]* What's wrong with England?

TEDDIE I don't think anything's wrong with England. I expect something's wrong with me. I've been away too

long England seems to me full of people doing things they don't want to because other people expect it of them

ELIZABETH Isn't that what you call a high degree of civilisation?

TEDDIE People seem to me so insincere When you go to parties in London they're all babbling about art, and you feel that in their hearts they don't care twopence about it They read the books that everybody is talking about because they don't want to be out of it In the F M S we don't get very many books, and we read those we have over and over again They mean so much to us I don't think the people over there are half so clever as the people at home, but one gets to know them better You see, there are so few of us that we have to make the best of one another

ELIZABETH I imagine that frills are not much worn in the F M S It must be a comfort

TEDDIE It's not much good being pretentious where everyone knows exactly who you are and what your income is

ELIZABETH I don't think you want too much sincerity in society It would be like an iron girder in a house of cards

TEDDIE And then, you know, the place is ripping You get used to a blue sky and you miss it in England

ELIZABETH What do you do with yourself all the time?

TEDDIE Oh, one works like blazes You have to be a pretty hefty fellow to be a planter And then there's ripping bathing You know, it's lovely, with palm trees all along the beach And there's shooting And now and then we have a little dance to a gramophone

ELIZABETH [*Pretending to tease him*] I think you've got a young woman out there, Teddie.

TEDDIE [*Vehemently*] Oh, no!

[*She is a little taken aback by the earnestness of his disclaimer There is a moment's silence, then she recovers herself*]

ELIZABETH But you'll have to marry and settle down one of these days, you know

TEDDIE I want to, but it's not a thing you can do lightly

ELIZABETH I don't know why there more than elsewhere

TEDDIE In England if people don't get on they go their own ways and jog along after a fashion In a place like that you're thrown a great deal on your own resources

ELIZABETH Of course

TEDDIE Lots of girls come out because they think they're going to have a good time But if they're empty-headed, then they're just faced with their own emptiness and they're done If their husbands can afford it they go home and settle down as grass-widows

ELIZABETH I've met them They seem to find it a very pleasant occupation

TEDDIE It's rotten for their husbands, though

ELIZABETH And if the husbands can't afford it?

TEDDIE Oh, then they tittle

ELIZABETH It's not a very alluring prospect

TEDDIE But if the woman's the right sort she wouldn't exchange it for any life in the world When all's said and done, it's we who've made the Empire

ELIZABETH What sort is the right sort?

TEDDIE A woman of courage and endurance and sincerity Of course, it's hopeless unless she's in love with her husband.

[*He is looking at her earnestly and she, raising her eyes, gives him a long look There is silence between them.*]

TEDDIE My house stands on the side of a hill, and the

coconut trees wind down to the shore Azaleas grow
in my garden, and camellias, and all sorts of ripping
flowers And in front of me is the winding coast line,
and then the blue sea

[*A pause*]

Do you know that I'm awfully in love with you?

ELIZABETH [*Gravely*] I wasn't quite sure I wondered

TEDDIE And you?

[*She nods slowly*]

I've never kissed you.

ELIZABETH I don't want you to

[*They look at one another steadily They are both grave*
ARNOLD *comes in hurriedly*]

ARNOLD They're coming, Elizabeth

ELIZABETH [*As though returning from a distant world*] Who?

ARNOLD [*Impatiently*] My dear! My mother, of course
The car is just coming up the drive.

TEDDIE Would you like me to clear out?

ARNOLD No, no! For goodness' sake stay.

ELIZABETH We'd better go and meet them, Arnold

ARNOLD No, no, I think they'd much better be shown in
I feel simply sick with nervousness.

[*ANNA comes in from the garden*]

ANNA Your guests have arrived

ELIZABETH Yes, I know

ARNOLD I've given orders that luncheon should be served
at once

ELIZABETH Why? It's not half-past one already, is it?

ARNOLD I thought it would help When you don't know
exactly what to say you can always eat.

[*The BUTLER comes in and announces*]

BUTLER Lady Catherine Champion-Cheney Lord Porteous.

[LADY KITTY comes in followed by PORTEOUS, and the BUTLER goes out LADY KITTY is a gay little lady, with dyed red hair and painted cheeks She is somewhat outrageously dressed She never forgets that she has been a pretty woman and she still behaves as if she were twenty-five LORD PORTEOUS is a very bald, elderly gentleman in loose, rather eccentric clothes He is snappy and gruff This is not at all the couple that ELIZABETH expected, and for a moment she stares at them with round, startled eyes LADY KITTY goes up to her with outstretched hands

LADY KITTY Elizabeth! Elizabeth! [*She kisses her effusively*]
What an adorable creature! [*Turning to PORTEOUS*]
Hughie, isn't she adorable?

PORTEOUS [*With a grunt*] Ugh!

[ELIZABETH, smiling now, turns to him and gives him her hand

ELIZABETH How d'you do?

PORTEOUS Damnable road you've got down here How d'you do, my dear? Why d'you have such damnable roads in England?

[LADY KITTY's eyes fall on TEDDIE and she goes up to him with her arms thrown back, prepared to throw them round him

LADY KITTY My boy, my boy! I should have known you anywhere!

ELIZABETH [*Hastily*] That's Arnold

LADY KITTY [*Without a moment's hesitation*] The image of his father! I should have known him anywhere! [*She throws her arms round his neck*] My boy, my boy!

PORTEOUS [*With a grunt*] Ugh!

LADY KITTY Tell me, would you have known me again? Have I changed?

ARNOLD I was only five, you know, when—when you . .

LADY KITTY [*Emotionally*] I remember as if it was yesterday I went up into your room [*With a sudden change of manner*] By the way, I always thought that nurse drank Did you ever find out if she really did?

PORTEOUS How the devil can you expect him to know that, Kitty?

LADY KITTY You've never had a child, Hughie, how can you tell what they know and what they don't?

ELIZABETH [*Coming to the rescue*] This is Arnold, Lord Porteous

PORTEOUS [*Shaking hands with him*] How d'you do? I knew your father

ARNOLD Yes

PORTEOUS Alive still?

ARNOLD Yes

PORTEOUS He must be getting on Is he well?

ARNOLD Very

PORTEOUS Ugh! Takes care of himself, I suppose I'm not at all well This damned climate doesn't agree with me

ELIZABETH [*To LADY KITTY*] This is Mrs Shenstone And this is Mr Luton I hope you don't mind a very small party

LADY KITTY [*Shaking hands with ANNA and TEDDIE*] Oh, no, I shall enjoy it I used to give enormous parties here Political, you know How nice you've made this room!

ELIZABETH Oh, that's Arnold

ARNOLD [*Nervously*] D'you like this chair? I've just bought it It's exactly my period

PORTEOUS [*Bluntly*] It's a fake

ARNOLD [*Indignantly*] I don't think it is for a minute

PORTEOUS The legs are not right

ARNOLD I don't know how you can say that If there is anything right about it, it's the legs

LADY KITTY I'm sure they're right

PORTEOUS You know nothing whatever about it, Kitty

LADY KITTY That's what you think I think it's a beautiful chair Hepplewhite?

ARNOLD No, Sheraton

LADY KITTY Oh, I know The School for Scandal

PORTEOUS Sheraton, my dear Sheraton

LADY KITTY Yes, that's what I say I acted the screen scene at some amateur theatricals in Florence, and Ermete Novelli, the great Italian tragedian, told me he'd never seen a Lady Teazle like me

PORTEOUS Ugh!

LADY KITTY [*To ELIZABETH*] Do you act?

ELIZABETH Oh, I couldn't I should be too nervous

LADY KITTY I'm never nervous I'm a born actress Of course, if I had my time over again I'd go on the stage You know, it's extraordinary how they keep young Actresses, I mean I think it's because they're always playing different parts Hughie, do you think Arnold takes after me or after his father? Of course I think he's the very image of me Arnold, I think I ought to tell you that I was received into the Catholic Church last winter I'd been thinking about it for years, and last time we were at Monte Carlo I met such a nice monsignore I told him what my difficulties were and he was too wonderful I knew Hughie wouldn't approve, so I kept it a secret [*To ELIZABETH*] Are you interested in religion? I think it's too wonderful. We must have a long talk about it one of these days [*Pointing to her frock*] Callot?

ELIZABETH No, Worth

LADY KITTY I knew it was either Worth or Callot Of course, it's line that's the important thing I go to Worth myself, and I always say to him, Line, my dear

Worth, line What *is* the matter, Hughie?

PORTEOUS These new teeth of mine are so damned uncomfortable

LADY KITTY Men are extraordinary They can't stand the smallest discomfort Why, a woman's life is uncomfortable from the moment she gets up in the morning till the moment she goes to bed at night And d'you think it's comfortable to sleep with a mask on your face

PORTEOUS They don't seem to hold up properly

LADY KITTY Well, that's not the fault of your teeth That's the fault of your gums

PORTEOUS Damned rotten dentist That's what's the matter

LADY KITTY I thought he was a very nice dentist He told me *my* teeth would last till I was fifty He has a Chinese room It's so interesting, while he scrapes your teeth he tells you all about the dear Empress Dowager Are you interested in China? I think it's too wonderful You know they've cut off their pigtails I think it's such a pity They were so picturesque

[*The BUTLER comes in*]

BUTLER. Luncheon is served, sir

ELIZABETH Would you like to see your rooms?

PORTEOUS We can see our rooms after luncheon.

LADY KITTY I must powder my nose, Hughie.

PORTEOUS Powder it down here

LADY KITTY I never saw any one so inconsiderate.

PORTEOUS You'll keep us all waiting half an hour I know you

LADY KITTY [*Fumbling in her bag*] Oh, well, peace at any price, as Lord Beaconsfield said.

PORTEOUS He said a lot of damned silly things, Kitty, but he never said that

[LADY KITTY's face changes Perplexity is followed by dismay, and dismay by consternation]

LADY KITTY Oh!

ELIZABETH What is the matter?

LADY KITTY [*With anguish*] My lip-stick!

ELIZABETH Can't you find it?

LADY KITTY I had it in the car Hughie, you remember that I had it in the car

PORTEOUS I don't remember anything about it

LADY KITTY Don't be so stupid, Hughie Why, when we came through the gates I said My home, my home! and I took it out and put some on my lips

ELIZABETH Perhaps you dropped it in the car

LADY KITTY For heaven's sake send someone to look for it

ARNOLD I'll ring

LADY KITTY I'm absolutely lost without my lip-stick Lend me yours, darling, will you?

ELIZABETH I'm awfully sorry I'm afraid I haven't got one

LADY KITTY Do you mean to say you don't use a lip-stick?

ELIZABETH Never

PORTEOUS Look at her lips What the devil d'you think she wants muck like that for?

LADY KITTY Oh, my dear, what a mistake you make! You *must* use a lip-stick It's so good for the lips Men like it, you know I couldn't *live* without a lip-stick

[CHAMPION-CHENEY appears at the window holding in his upstretched hand a little gold case]

C-C [*As he comes in*] Has any one here lost a diminutive utensil containing, unless I am mistaken, a favourite preparation for the toilet?

[ARNOLD and ELIZABETH are thunderstruck at his

*appearance and even TEDDIE and ANNA are taken
aback But LADY KITTY is overjoyed*

LADY KITTY My lip-stick!

C-C I found it in the drive and I ventured to bring it in

LADY KITTY It's Saint Antony I said a little prayer to him
when I was hunting in my bag

PORTEOUS Saint Antony be blowed! It's Clive, by God!

LADY KITTY [*Startled, her attention suddenly turning from the
lip-stick*] Clive!

C-C You didn't recognise me It's many years since we met

LADY KITTY My poor Clive, your hair has gone quite
white!

C-C [*Holding out his hand*] I hope you had a pleasant
journey down from London

LADY KITTY [*Offering him her cheek*] You may kiss me,
Clive

C-C [*Kissing her*] You Don't mind, Hughie?

PORTEOUS [*With a grunt*] Ugh!

C-C [*Going up to him cordially*] And how are you, my dear
Hughie?

PORTEOUS Damned rheumatic if you want to know
Filthy climate you have in this country

C-C Aren't you going to shake hands with me, Hughie?

PORTEOUS I have no objection to shaking hands with you

C-C You've aged, my poor Hughie

PORTEOUS Someone was asking me how old you were the
other day

C-C Were they surprised when you told them?

PORTEOUS Surprised! They wondered you weren't dead

[The BUTLER comes in]

BUTLER Did you ring, sir?

ARNOLD No Oh, yes, I did It doesn't matter now.

C-C. [*As the BUTLER is going*] One moment My dear Elizabeth, I've come to throw myself on your mercy My servants are busy with their own affairs There's not a thing for me to eat in my cottage

ELIZABETH Oh, but we shall be delighted if you'll lunch with us

C-C It either means that or my immediate death from starvation You don't mind, Arnold?

ARNOLD My dear father!

ELIZABETH [*To the BUTLER*] Mr Cheney will lunch here

BUTLER Very good, ma'am

C-C [*To LADY KITTY*] And what do you think of Arnold?

LADY KITTY I adore him.

C-C He's grown, hasn't he? But then you'd expect him to do that in thirty years

ARNOLD For God's sake let's go in to lunch, Elizabeth!

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The Scene is the same as in the preceding Act

It is afternoon When the curtain rises PORTEOUS and LADY KITTY, ANNA and TEDDIE are playing bridge ELIZABETH and CHAMPION-CHENEY are watching PORTEOUS and LADY KITTY are partners

C-C When will Arnold be back, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH Soon, I think

C-C Is he addressing a meeting?

ELIZABETH No, it's only a conference with his agent and one or two constituents

PORTEOUS [*Irritably*] How any one can be expected to play bridge when people are shouting at the top of their voices all round them, I for one cannot understand

ELIZABETH [*Smiling*] I'm so sorry

ANNA I can see your hand, Lord Porteous

PORTEOUS It may help you

LADY KITTY I've told you over and over again to hold your cards up It ruins one's game when one can't help seeing one's opponent's hand

PORTEOUS One isn't obliged to look.

LADY KITTY What was Arnold's majority at the last election?

ELIZABETH Seven hundred and something

C-C He'll have to fight for it if he wants to keep his seat next time

PORTEOUS Are we playing bridge, or talking politics?

LADY KITTY I never find that conversation interferes with my game

PORTEOUS You certainly play no worse when you talk than when you hold your tongue

LADY KITTY I think that's a very offensive thing to say, Hughie Just because I don't play the same game as you do you think I can't play

PORTEOUS I'm glad you acknowledge it's not the same game as I play But why in God's name do you call it bridge?

C-C I agree with Kitty I hate people who play bridge as though they were at a funeral and knew their feet were getting wet

PORTEOUS Of course you take Kitty's part

LADY KITTY That's the least he can do

C-C I have a naturally cheerful disposition

PORTEOUS You've never had anything to sour it

LADY KITTY I don't know what you mean by that, Hughie

PORTEOUS [*Trying to contain himself*] Must you trump my ace?

LADY KITTY [*Innocently*] Oh, was that your ace, darling?

PORTEOUS [*Furiously*] Yes, it was my ace

LADY KITTY Oh, well, it was the only trump I had I shouldn't have made it anyway

PORTEOUS You needn't have told them that Now she knows exactly what I've got

LADY KITTY She knew before

PORTEOUS How could she know?

LADY KITTY She said she'd seen your hand

ANNA Oh, I didn't I said I could see it

LADY KITTY Well, I naturally supposed that if she could see it she did

PORTEOUS Really, Kitty, you have the most extraordinary ideas

C-C Not at all If any one is such a fool as to show me his hand, of course I look at it

PORTEOUS [*Fuming*] If you study the etiquette of bridge, you'll discover that onlookers are expected not to interfere with the game

C-C My dear Hughie, this is a matter of ethics, not of bridge

ANNA Anyhow, I get the game And rubber.

TEDDIE I claim a revoke

PORTEOUS Who revoked?

TEDDIE You did

PORTEOUS Nonsense. I've never revoked in my life

TEDDIE I'll show you [*He turns over the tricks to show the faces of the cards*] You threw away a club on the third heart trick and you had another heart

PORTEOUS I never had more than two hearts.

TEDDIE Oh, yes, you had Look here That's the card you played on the last trick but one

LADY KITTY [*Delighted to catch him out*] There's no doubt about it, Hughie You revoked

PORTEOUS I tell you I did not revoke I never revoke

C-C You did, Hughie I wondered what on earth you were doing

PORTEOUS I don't know how any one can be expected not to revoke when there's this confounded chatter going on all the time

TEDDIE Well, that's another hundred to us

PORTEOUS [*To CHAMPION-CHENEY*] I wish you wouldn't breathe down my neck I never can play bridge when there's somebody breathing down my neck.

[The party have risen from the bridge-table, and they scatter about the room]

ANNA Well, I'm going to take a book and lie down in the hammock till it's time to dress

TEDDIE [*Who has been adding up*] I'll put it down in the book, shall I?

PORTEOUS [*Who has not moved, setting out the cards for a patience*] Yes, yes, put it down I never revoke

[ANNA goes out]

LADY KITTY Would you like to come for a little stroll, Hughie?

PORTEOUS What for?

LADY KITTY Exercise

PORTEOUS I hate exercise

C-C [*Looking at the patience*] The seven goes on the eight
[PORTEOUS takes no notice]

LADY KITTY The seven goes on the eight, Hughie

PORTEOUS I don't choose to put the seven on the eight

C-C That knave goes on the queen

PORTEOUS I'm not blind, thank you

LADY KITTY The three goes on the four.

C-C All these go over

PORTEOUS [*Furiously*] Am I playing this patience, or are you playing it?

LADY KITTY But you're missing everything

PORTEOUS That's my business

C-C It's no good losing your temper over it, Hughie.

PORTEOUS Go away, both of you You irritate me

LADY KITTY We were only trying to help you, Hughie

PORTEOUS I don't want to be helped I want to do it by myself

LADY KITTY I think your manners are perfectly deplorable, Hughie.

PORTEOUS It's simply maddening when you're playing patience and people won't leave you alone

C-C We won't say another word

PORTEOUS That three goes I believe it's coming out If I'd been such a fool as to put that seven up I shouldn't have been able to bring these down

[He puts down several cards while they watch him silently]

LADY KITTY AND C-C *[Together]* The four goes on the five

PORTEOUS *[Throwing down the cards violently]* Damn you! Why don't you leave me alone? It's intolerable

C-C It was coming out, my dear fellow

PORTEOUS I know it was coming out Confound you!

LADY KITTY How petty you are, Hughie!

PORTEOUS Petty, be damned! I've told you over and over again that I will not be interfered with when I'm playing patience

LADY KITTY Don't talk to me like that, Hughie

PORTEOUS I shall talk to you as I please.

LADY KITTY *[Beginning to cry]* Oh, you brute! You brute!
[She flings out of the room]

PORTEOUS Oh, damn! Now she's going to cry

[He shambles out into the garden CHAMPION-CHENEY, ELIZABETH and TEDDIE are left alone There is a moment's pause CHAMPION-CHENEY looks from TEDDIE to ELIZABETH, with an ironical smile]

C-C. Upon my soul, they might be married They frip so much

ELIZABETH *[Frigidly]* It's been nice of you to come here so often since they arrived. It's helped to make things easy

C-C Irony? It's a rhetorical form not much favoured in this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

ELIZABETH What exactly are you getting at?

C-C How slangy the young women of the present day are! I suppose the fact that Arnold is a purist leads you to the contrary extravagance

ELIZABETH Anyhow you know what I mean

C-C [*With a smile*] I have a dim, groping suspicion

ELIZABETH You promised to keep away Why did you come back the moment they arrived?

C-C Curiosity, my dear child A surely pardonable curiosity

ELIZABETH And since then you've been here all the time You don't generally favour us with so much of your company when you're down at your cottage

C-C I've been excessively amused

ELIZABETH It has struck me that whenever they started fripping you took a malicious pleasure in goading them on

C-C I don't think there's much love lost between them now, do you?

[*TEDDIE is making as though to leave the room*]

ELIZABETH Don't go, Teddie

C-C No, please don't I'm only staying a minute We were talking about Lady Kitty just before she arrived [*To ELIZABETH*] Do you remember? The pale, frail lady in black satin and old lace

ELIZABETH. [*With a chuckle*] You are a devil, you know

C-C Ah, well, he's always had the reputation of being a humorist and a gentleman

ELIZABETH Did *you* expect her to be like that, poor dear?

C-C My dear child, I hadn't the vaguest idea You were asking me the other day what she was like when she ran away I didn't tell you half She was so gay and so natural Who would have thought that animation would

turn into such frivolity, and that charming impulsiveness lead to such a ridiculous affectation?

ELIZABETH It rather sets my nerves on edge to hear the way you talk of her

C-C It's the truth that sets your nerves on edge, not I

ELIZABETH You loved her once Have you no feeling for her at all?

C-C None Why should I?

ELIZABETH She's the mother of your son

C-C My dear child, you have a charming nature, as simple, frank and artless as hers was Don't let pure humbug obscure your common sense

ELIZABETH We have no right to judge She's only been here two days We know nothing about her

C-C My dear, her soul is as thickly rouged as her face She hasn't an emotion that's sincere She's tinsel You think I'm a cruel, cynical old man Why, when I think of what she was, if I didn't laugh at what she has become I should cry

ELIZABETH How do you know she wouldn't be just the same now if she'd remained your wife? Do you think your influence would have had such a salutary effect on her?

C-C [*Good-humouredly*] I like you when you're bitter and rather insolent

ELIZABETH D'you like me enough to answer my question?

C-C She was only twenty-seven when she went away She might have become anything She might have become the woman you expected her to be There are very few of us who are strong enough to make circumstances serve us We are the creatures of our environment She's a silly worthless woman because she's led a silly worthless life.

ELIZABETH [*Disturbed*] You're horrible to-day

C-C I don't say it's I who could have prevented her from becoming this ridiculous caricature of a pretty woman grown old. But life could. Here she would have had the friends fit to her station, and a decent activity, and worthy interests. Ask her what her life has been all these years among divorced women and kept women and the men who consort with them. There is no more lamentable pursuit than a life of pleasure.

ELIZABETH At all events she loved and she loved greatly. I have only pity and affection for her.

C-C And if she loved what d'you think she felt when she saw that she had ruined Hughie? Look at him. He was tight last night after dinner and tight the night before.

ELIZABETH I know.

C-C And she took it as a matter of course. How long do you suppose he's been getting tight every night? Do you think he was like that thirty years ago? Can you imagine that that was a brilliant young man, whom every one expected to be Prime Minister? Look at him now. A grumpy sodden old fellow with false teeth.

ELIZABETH You have false teeth, too.

C-C Yes, but damn it all, they fit. She's ruined him and she knows she's ruined him.

ELIZABETH [*Looking at him suspiciously*] Why are you saying all this to me?

C-C Am I hurting your feelings?

ELIZABETH I think I've had enough for the present.

C-C I'll go and have a look at the gold-fish. I want to see Arnold when he comes in [*Politely*]. I'm afraid we've been boring Mr. Luton.

TEDDIE Not at all.

C-C When are you going back to the F M S?

TEDDIE In about a month

C-C I see

[*He goes out*]

ELIZABETH I wonder what he has at the back of his head

TEDDIE D'you think he was talking *at* you?

ELIZABETH He's as clever as a bagful of monkeys

[*There is a moment's pause TEDDIE hesitates a little, and when he speaks it is in a different tone He is grave and somewhat nervous*]

TEDDIE It seems very difficult to get a few minutes alone with you I wonder if you've been making it difficult?

ELIZABETH I wanted to think.

TEDDIE I've made up my mind to go away to-morrow

ELIZABETH Why?

TEDDIE I want you altogether or not at all

ELIZABETH You're so arbitrary

TEDDIE You said you—you said you cared for me

ELIZABETH I do

TEDDIE Do you mind if we talk it over now?

ELIZABETH No

TEDDIE [*Frowning*] It makes me feel rather shy and awkward I've repeated to myself over and over again exactly what I want to say to you, and now all I'd prepared seems rather fooling.✓

ELIZABETH I'm so afraid I'm going to cry

TEDDIE I feel it's all so tremendously serious and I think we ought to keep emotion out of it You're rather emotional, aren't you?

ELIZABETH [*Half smiling and half in tears*] So are you for the matter of that

TEDDIE That's why I wanted to have everything I meant to say to you cut and dried I think it would be awfully

unfair if I made love to you and all that sort of thing,
and you were carried away I wrote it all down and
thought I'd send it you as a letter

ELIZABETH Why didn't you?

TEDDIE I got the wind up A letter seems so—so cold
You see, I love you so awfully

ELIZABETH For goodness' sake don't say that

TEDDIE You mustn't cry Please don't, or I shall go all to
pieces

ELIZABETH [*Trying to smile*] I'm sorry It doesn't mean
anything really It's only tears running out of my eyes

TEDDIE Our only chance is to be awfully matter-of-fact

*[He stops for a moment He finds it quite difficult to
control himself He clears his throat He frowns with
annoyance at himself]*

ELIZABETH What's the matter?

TEDDIE I've got a sort of lump in my throat It is idiotic
I think I'll have a cigarette

[She watches him in silence while he lights a cigarette]

You see, I've never been in love with anyone before, not
really It's knocked me endways I don't know how I
can live without you now . . . Does that old fool
know I'm in love with you?

ELIZABETH I think so

TEDDIE When he was talking about Lady Kitty smashing
up Lord Porteous' career I thought there was something
at the back of it

ELIZABETH I think he was trying to persuade me not to
smash up yours

TEDDIE I'm sure that's very considerate of him, but I don't
happen to have one to smash I wish I had It's the only
time in my life I've wished I were a hell of a swell so that

I could chuck it all and show you how much more you are to me than anything else in the world

ELIZABETH [*Affectionately*] You're a dear old thing, Teddie

TEDDIE You know, I don't really know how to make love, but if I did I couldn't do it now because I just want to be absolutely practical

ELIZABETH [*Chaffing him*] I'm glad you don't know how to make love It would be almost more than I could bear

TEDDIE You see, I'm not at all romantic and that sort of thing I'm just a common or garden business man All this is so dreadfully serious and I think we ought to be sensible

ELIZABETH [*With a break in her voice*] You owl!

TEDDIE No, Elizabeth, don't say things like that to me I want you to consider all the *pros* and *cons*, and my heart's thumping against my chest, and you know I love you, I love you, I love you

ELIZABETH [*In a sigh of passion*] Oh, my precious

TEDDIE [*Impatiently, but with himself, rather than with ELIZABETH*] Don't be idiotic, Elizabeth I'm not going to tell you that I can't live without you and a lot of muck like that You know that you mean everything in the world to me [*Almost giving it up as a bad job*] Oh, my God!

ELIZABETH [*Her voice faltering*] D'you think there's anything you can say to me that I don't know already?

TEDDIE [*Desperately*] But I haven't said a single thing I wanted to I'm a business man and I want to put it all in a business way, if you understand what I mean

ELIZABETH [*Smiling*] I don't believe you're a very good business man

TEDDIE [*Sharply*] You don't know what you're talking about I'm a first-rate business man, but somehow this

is different [*Hopelessly*] I don't know why it won't go right

ELIZABETH What are we going to do about it?

TEDDIE You see, it's not just because you're awfully pretty that I love you I'd love you just as much if you were old and ugly It's you I love, not what you look like And it's not only love, love be blowed! It's that I *like* you so tremendously I think you're such a ripping good sort I just want to be with you I feel so jolly and happy just to think you're there I'm so awfully *fond* of you

ELIZABETH [*Laughing through her tears*] I don't know if this is your idea of introducing a business proposition

TEDDIE Damn you, you won't let me

ELIZABETH You said, Damn you

TEDDIE I meant it

ELIZABETH Your voice sounded as if you meant, you perfect duck

TEDDIE Really, Elizabeth, you're intolerable

ELIZABETH I'm doing nothing

TEDDIE Yes, you are, you're putting me off my blow What I want to say is perfectly simple I'm a very ordinary business man

ELIZABETH You've said that before.

TEDDIE [*Angrily*] Shut up I haven't got a bob besides what I earn I've got no position I'm nothing You're rich and you're a big pot and you've got everything that anyone can want It's awful cheek my saying anything to you at all But after all there's only one thing that really matters in the world, and that's love I love you Chuck all this, Elizabeth, and come to me

ELIZABETH Are you cross with me?

TEDDIE Furious

ELIZABETH Darling!

TEDDIE If you don't want me tell me so at once and let me get out quickly

ELIZABETH Teddie, nothing in the world matters anything to me but you I'll go wherever you take me I love you

TEDDIE [*All to pieces*] Oh, my God!

ELIZABETH Does it mean as much to you as that? Oh, Teddie!

TEDDIE [*Trying to control himself*] Don't be a fool, Elizabeth

ELIZABETH It's you're the fool You're making me cry

TEDDIE You're so damned emotional

ELIZABETH Damned emotional yourself I'm sure you're a rotten business man

TEDDIE I don't care what you think You've made me so awfully happy I say, what a lark life's going to be

ELIZABETH Teddie, you are an angel

TEDDIE Let's get out quick. It's no good wasting time Elizabeth

ELIZABETH What?

TEDDIE Nothing I just like to say Elizabeth

ELIZABETH You fool

TEDDIE I say, can you shoot?

ELIZABETH No

TEDDIE I'll teach you You don't know how ripping it is to start out from your camp at dawn and travel through the jungle And you're so tired at night and the sky's all starry It's a fair treat Of course I d.dn't want to say anything about all that till you'd decided. I'd made up my mind to be absolutely practical

ELIZABETH [*Chaffing him*] The only practical thing you said was that love is the only thing that really matters

TEDDIE [*Happily*] Pull the other leg next time, will you? I should hate to have one longer than the other.

ELIZABETH Isn't it fun being in love with someone who's in love with you?

TEDDIE I say, I think I'd better clear out at once, don't you? It seems rather rotten to stay on in—in this house

ELIZABETH You can't go to-night There's no train.

TEDDIE I'll go to-morrow I'll wait in London till you're ready to join me

ELIZABETH I'm not going to leave a note on the pincushion like Lady Kitty, you know I'm going to tell Arnold

TEDDIE Are you? Don't you think there'll be an awful bother?

ELIZABETH I must face it I should hate to be sly and deceitful

TEDDIE Well, then, let's face it together

ELIZABETH No, I'll talk to Arnold by myself

TEDDIE You won't let anyone influence you?

ELIZABETH No

*He holds out his hand and she takes it They look into one another's eyes with grave, almost solemn affection
There is the sound outside of a car driving up*

ELIZABETH There's the car Arnold's come back I must go and bathe my eyes I don't want them to see I've been crying

TEDDIE All right [*As she is going*] Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH [*Stopping*] What?

TEDDIE Bless you

ELIZABETH [*Affectionately*] Idiot!

[She goes out of the door and TEDDIE through the french window into the garden For an instant the room is empty ARNOLD comes in He sits down and takes some papers out of his dispatch-case LADY KITTY enters He gets up.]

LADY KITTY I saw you come in Oh, my dear, don't get up There's no reason why you should be so dreadfully polite to me

ARNOLD I've just rung for a cup of tea

LADY KITTY Perhaps we shall have the chance of a little talk We don't seem to have had five minutes by ourselves I want to make your acquaintance, you know

ARNOLD I should like you to know that it's not by my wish that my father is here

LADY KITTY But I'm so interested to see him

ARNOLD I was afraid that you and Lord Porteous must find it embarrassing

LADY KITTY Oh, no Hughie was his greatest friend They were at Eton and Oxford together I think your father has improved so much since I saw him last He wasn't good-looking as a young man, but now he's quite handsome

[The FOOTMAN brings in a tray on which are tea-things]

LADY KITTY Shall I pour it out for you?

ARNOLD Thank you very much

LADY KITTY Do you take sugar?

ARNOLD No I gave it up during the war

LADY KITTY So wise of you It's so bad for the figure Besides being patriotic, of course Isn't it absurd that I should ask my son if he takes sugar or not? Life is really very quaint Sad, of course, but oh, so quaint! Often I lie in bed at night and have a good laugh to myself as I think how quaint life is

ARNOLD I'm afraid I'm a very serious person.

LADY KITTY How old are you now, Arnold?

ARNOLD Thirty-five

LADY KITTY Are you really? Of course, I was a child when I married your father.

ARNOLD Really He always told me you were twenty-two

LADY KITTY Oh, what nonsense! Why, I was married out of the nursery I put my hair up for the first time on my wedding-day

ARNOLD Where is Lord Porteous?

LADY KITTY My dear, it sounds too absurd to hear you call him Lord Porteous Why don't you call him—Uncle Hughie?

ARNOLD He doesn't happen to be my uncle

LADY KITTY No, but he's your godfather You know, I'm sure you'll like him when you know him better I'm so hoping that you and Elizabeth will come and stay with us in Florence I simply adore Elizabeth She's too beautiful

ARNOLD Her hair is very pretty

LADY KITTY It's not touched up, is it?

ARNOLD Oh, no

LADY KITTY I just wondered It's rather a coincidence that her hair should be the same colour as mine I suppose it shows that your father and you are attracted by just the same thing So interesting, heredity, isn't it?

ARNOLD Very

LADY KITTY Of course, since I joined the Catholic Church I don't believe in it any more Darwin and all that sort of thing Too dreadful Wicked, you know Besides, it's not very good form, is it?

[CHAMPION-CHENEY comes in from the garden]

C-C Do I intrude?

LADY KITTY Come in, Clive Arnold and I have been having such a wonderful heart-to-heart talk.

C-C Very nice

ARNOLD Father, I stepped in for a moment at the Harveys'

on my way back It's simply criminal what they're doing with that house

C-C What are they doing?

ARNOLD It's an almost perfect Georgian house and they've got a lot of dreadful Victorian furniture I gave them my ideas on the subject, but it's quite hopeless They said they were attached to their furniture

C-C Arnold should have been an interior decorator

LADY KITTY He has wonderful taste He gets that from me

ARNOLD I suppose I have a certain *flair* I have a passion for decorating houses

LADY KITTY You've made this one charming

C-C D'you remember, we just had chintzes and comfortable chairs when we lived here, Kitty

LADY KITTY Perfectly hideous, wasn't it?

C-C In those days gentlemen and ladies were not expected to have taste

ARNOLD You know, I've been looking at this chair again Since Lord Porteous said the legs weren't right I've been very uneasy

LADY KITTY He only said that because he was in a bad temper

C-C His temper seems to me very short these days, Kitty

LADY KITTY Oh, it is

ARNOLD You feel he knows what he's talking about I gave seventy-five pounds for that chair I'm very seldom taken in I always think if a thing's right you feel it

C-C Well, don't let it disturb your night's rest

ARNOLD But, my dear father, that's just what it does I had a most horrible dream about it last night

LADY KITTY Here is Hughie

ARNOLD I'm going to fetch a book I have on Old English

furniture There's an illustration of a chair which is almost identical with this one

[PORTEOUS comes in]

PORTEOUS Quite a family gathering, by George!

C-C I was thinking just now we'd make a very pleasing picture of a typical English home

ARNOLD I'll be back in five minutes There's something I want to show you, Lord Porteous

[He goes out]

C-C Would you like to play piquet with me, Hughie?

PORTEOUS Not particularly

C-C You were never much of a piquet player, were you?

PORTEOUS My dear Clive, you people don't know what piquet is in England

C-C Let's have a game then You may make money

PORTEOUS I don't want to play with you

LADY KITTY I don't know why not, Hughie

PORTEOUS Let me tell you that I don't like your manner

C-C I'm sorry for that I'm afraid I can't offer to change it at my age

PORTEOUS I don't know what you want to be hanging around here for

C-C A natural attachment to my home

PORTEOUS If you'd had any tact you'd have kept out of the way while we were here

C-C My dear Hughie, I don't understand your attitude at all If I'm willing to let bygones be bygones why should you object?

PORTEOUS Damn it all, they're not bygones

C-C After all, I am the injured party

PORTEOUS How the devil are you the injured party?

C-C Well, you did run away with my wife, didn't you?

LADY KITTY Now, don't let's go into ancient history I can't see why we shouldn't all be friends

PORTEOUS I beg you not to interfere, Kitty

LADY KITTY I'm very fond of Clive

PORTEOUS You never cared two straws for Clive You only say that to irritate me

LADY KITTY Not at all I don't see why he shouldn't come and stay with us

C-C I'd love to I think Florence in spring-time is delightful Have you central heating?

PORTEOUS I never liked you, I don't like you now, and I never shall like you

C-C How very unfortunate! Because I liked you, I like you now, and I shall continue to like you

LADY KITTY There's something very nice about you, Clive

PORTEOUS If you think that, why the devil did you leave him?

LADY KITTY Are you going to reproach me because I loved you? How utterly, utterly, utterly detestable you are!

C-C Now, now, don't quarrel with one another

LADY KITTY It's all his fault I'm the easiest person in the world to live with But really he'd try the patience of a saint

C-C Come, come, don't get upset, Kitty When two people live together there must be a certain amount of give and take

PORTEOUS I don't know what the devil you're talking about.

C-C It hasn't escaped my observation that you are a little inclined to frip Many couples are I think it's a pity

PORTEOUS Would you have the very great kindness to mind your own business?

LADY KITTY It is his business He naturally wants me to be happy

C-C I have the very greatest affection for Kitty

PORTEOUS Then why the devil didn't you look after her properly?

C-C. My dear Hughie, you were my greatest friend I trusted you It may have been rash

PORTEOUS It was inexcusable

LADY KITTY I don't know what you mean by that, Hughie

PORTEOUS Don't, don't, don't try and bully me, Kitty

LADY KITTY Oh, I know what you mean

PORTEOUS Then why the devil did you say you didn't?

LADY KITTY When I think that I sacrificed everything for that man! And for thirty years I've had to live in a filthy marble palace with no sanitary conveniences

C-C D'you mean to say you haven't got a bathroom?

LADY KITTY I've had to wash in a tub

C-C My poor Kitty, how you've suffered!

PORTEOUS Really, Kitty, I'm sick of hearing of the sacrifices you made I suppose you think I sacrificed nothing I should have been Prime Minister by now if it hadn't been for you

LADY KITTY Nonsense!

PORTEOUS What do you mean by that? Every one said I should be Prime Minister Shouldn't I have been Prime Minister, Clive?

C-C It was certainly the general expectation

PORTEOUS I was the most promising young man of my day I was bound to get a seat in the Cabinet at the next election

LADY KITTY They'd have found you out just as I've found you out I'm sick of hearing that I ruined your career.

You never had a career to ruin Prime Minister! You haven't the brain You haven't the character

C-C Cheek, push, and a gift of the gab will serve very well instead, you know

LADY KITTY Besides, in politics it's not the men that matter It's the women at the back of them I could have made Clive a Cabinet Minister if I'd wanted to

PORTEOUS Clive?

LADY KITTY With my beauty, my charm, my force of character, my wit, I could have done anything

PORTEOUS Clive was nothing but my political secretary When I was Prime Minister I might have made him Governor of some Colony or other Western Australia say Out of pure kindness

LADY KITTY [*With flashing eyes*] D'you think I would have buried myself in Western Australia? With my beauty? My charm?

PORTEOUS Or Barbadoes, perhaps

LADY KITTY [*Furiously*] Barbadoes! Barbadoes can go to —Barbadoes

PORTEOUS That's all you'd have got

LADY KITTY Nonsense! I'd have India

PORTEOUS I would never have given you India

LADY KITTY You would have given me India

PORTEOUS I tell you I wouldn't

LADY KITTY The King would have given me India The nation would have insisted on my having India I would have been a vice-reine or nothing

PORTEOUS I tell you that as long as the interests of the British Empire—Damn it all, my teeth are coming out!

[*He hurries from the room*]

LADY KITTY It's too much. I can't bear it any more. I've

put up with him for thirty years and now I'm at the end of my tether

C-C Calm yourself, my dear Kitty

LADY KITTY I won't listen to a word I've quite made up my mind It's finished, finished, finished [*With a change of tone*] I was so touched when I heard that you never lived in this house again after I left it

C-C The cuckoos have always been very plentiful Their note has a personal application which, I must say, I have found extremely offensive

LADY KITTY When I saw that you didn't marry again I couldn't help thinking that you still loved me

C-C I am one of the few men I know who is able to profit by experience

LADY KITTY In the eyes of the Church I am still your wife The Church is so wise It knows that in the end a woman always comes back to her first love Clive, I am willing to return to you

C-C My dear Kitty, I couldn't take advantage of your momentary vexation with Hughie to let you take a step which I know you would bitterly regret

LADY KITTY You've waited for me a long time For Arnold's sake

C-C Do you think we really need bother about Arnold? In the last thirty years he's had time to grow used to the situation

LADY KITTY [*With a little smile*] I think I've sown my wild oats, Clive

C-C I haven't I was a good young man, Kitty.

LADY KITTY I know

C-C And I'm very glad, because it has enabled me to be a wicked old one

LADY KITTY I beg your pardon.

[ARNOLD comes in with a large book in his hand.

ARNOLD I say, I've found the book I was hunting for Oh, isn't Lord Porteous here?

LADY KITTY One moment, Arnold Your father and I are busy

ARNOLD I'm so sorry

[He goes out into the garden]

LADY KITTY Explain yourself, Clive

C-C When you ran away from me, Kitty, I was sore and angry and miserable But above all I felt a fool

LADY KITTY Men are so vain

C-C But I was a student of history, and presently I reflected that I shared my misfortune with very nearly all the greatest men

LADY KITTY I'm a great reader myself It has always struck me as peculiar

C-C The explanation is very simple Women dislike intelligence, and when they find it in their husbands they revenge themselves on them in the only way they can, by making them—well, what you made me

LADY KITTY It's ingenious It may be true

C-C I felt I had done my duty by society and I determined to devote the rest of my life to my own entertainment The House of Commons had always bored me excessively and the scandal of our divorce gave me an opportunity to resign my seat I have been relieved to find that the country got on perfectly well without me

LADY KITTY But has love never entered your life?

C-C Tell me frankly, Kitty, don't you think people make a lot of unnecessary fuss about love?

LADY KITTY It's the most wonderful thing in the world

C-C You're incorrigible Do you really think it was worth sacrificing so much for?

LADY KITTY My dear Clive, I don't mind telling you that if I had my time over again I should be unfaithful to you, but I should not leave you

C-C For some years I was notoriously the prey of a secret sorrow But I found so many charming creatures who were anxious to console that in the end it grew rather fatiguing Out of regard to my health I ceased to frequent the drawing-rooms of Mayfair

LADY KITTY And since then?

C-C Since then I have allowed myself the luxury of assisting financially a succession of dear little things, in a somewhat humble sphere, between the ages of twenty and twenty-five

LADY KITTY I cannot understand the infatuation of men for young girls I think they're so dull

C-C It's a matter of taste I love old wine, old friends and old books, but I like young women On their twenty-fifth birthday I give them a diamond ring and tell them they must no longer waste their youth and beauty on an old fogey like me We have a most affecting scene, my technique on these occasions is perfect, and then I start all over again

LADY KITTY You're a wicked old man, Clive

C-C That's what I told you But, by Georgel I'm a happy one

LADY KITTY There's only one course open to me now

C-C What is that?

LADY KITTY [*With a flashing smile*] To go and dress for dinner

C-C Capital I will follow your example

[*As LADY KITTY goes out ELIZABETH comes in*]

ELIZABETH Where is Arnold?

C-C. He's on the terrace I'll call him.

ELIZABETH Don't bother

C-C I was just strolling along to my cottage to put on a dinner jacket [*As he goes out*] Arnold

[*Exit C-C*]

ARNOLD Hulloal [*He comes in*] Oh, Elizabeth, I've found an illustration here of a chair which is almost identical with mine It's dated 1750 Look!

ELIZABETH That's very interesting

ARNOLD I want to show it to Porteous [*Moving a chair which has been misplaced*] You know, it does exasperate me the way people will not leave things alone I no sooner put a thing in its place than somebody moves it

ELIZABETH It must be maddening for you

ARNOLD It is You are the worst offender I can't think why you don't take the pride that I do in the house After all, it's one of the show places in the county

ELIZABETH I'm afraid you find me very unsatisfactory

ARNOLD [*Good-humouredly*] I don't know about that But my two subjects are politics and decoration I should be a perfect fool if I didn't see that you don't care two straws about either

ELIZABETH We haven't very much in common, Arnold, have we?

ARNOLD I don't think you can blame me for that.

ELIZABETH I don't I blame you for nothing I have no fault to find with you

ARNOLD [*Surprised at her significant tone*] Good gracious me, what's the meaning of all this?

ELIZABETH Well, I don't think there's any object in beating about the bush I want you to let me go

ARNOLD Go where?

ELIZABETH Away For always

ARNOLD My dear child, what *are* you talking about?

ELIZABETH I want to be free

ARNOLD [*Amused rather than disconcerted*] Don't be ridiculous, darling I daresay you're run down and want a change I'll take you over to Paris for a fortnight if you like

ELIZABETH I shouldn't have spoken to you if I hadn't quite made up my mind We've been married for three years and I don't think it's been a great success I'm frankly bored by the life you want me to lead

ARNOLD Well, if you'll allow me to say so, the fault is yours We lead a very distinguished, useful life We know a lot of extremely nice people

ELIZABETH I'm quite willing to allow that the fault is mine But how does that make it any better? I'm only twenty-five If I've made a mistake I have time to correct it

ARNOLD I can't bring myself to take you very seriously

ELIZABETH You see, I don't love you

ARNOLD Well, I'm awfully sorry But you weren't obliged to marry me You've made your bed and I'm afraid you must lie on it

ELIZABETH That's one of the falsest proverbs in the English language Why should you lie on the bed you've made if you don't want to? There's always the floor

ARNOLD For goodness' sake don't be funny, Elizabeth

ELIZABETH I've quite made up my mind to leave you, Arnold

ARNOLD Come, come, Elizabeth, you must be sensible You haven't any reason to leave me

ELIZABETH. Why should you wish to keep a woman tied to you who wants to be free?

ARNOLD I happen to be in love with you.

ELIZABETH You might have said that before

ARNOLD I thought you'd take it for granted You can't expect a man to go on making love to his wife after three

years I'm very busy I'm awfully keen on politics and I've worked like a dog to make this house a thing of beauty After all, a man marries to have a home, but also because he doesn't want to be bothered with sex and all that sort of thing I fell in love with you the first time I saw you and I've been in love ever since

ELIZABETH I'm sorry, but if you're not in love with a man his love doesn't mean very much to you

ARNOLD It's so ungrateful I've done everything in the world for you

ELIZABETH You've been very kind to me But you've asked me to lead a life I don't like and that I'm not suited for I'm awfully sorry to cause you pain, but now you must let me go

ARNOLD Nonsense! I'm a good deal older than you are and I think I have a little more sense In your interest as well as in mine I'm not going to do anything of the sort

ELIZABETH [*With a smile*] How can you prevent me? You can't keep me under lock and key

ARNOLD Please don't talk to me as if I were a foolish child You're my wife and you're going to remain my wife

ELIZABETH What sort of a life do you think we should lead? Do you think there'd be any more happiness for you than for me?

ARNOLD But what is it precisely that you suggest?

ELIZABETH Well, I want you to let me divorce you

ARNOLD [*Astounded*] Me? Thank you very much Are you under the impression I'm going to sacrifice my career for a whim of yours?

ELIZABETH How will it do that?

ARNOLD My seat's wobbly enough as it is Do you think I'd be able to hold it if I were in a divorce case? Even if it were a put-up job, as most divorces are nowadays, it would damn me.

ELIZABETH It's rather hard on a woman to be divorced

ARNOLD [*With sudden suspicion*] What do you mean by that? Are you in love with someone?

ELIZABETH Yes

ARNOLD Who?

ELIZABETH Teddie Luton

[He is astonished for a moment, then bursts into a laugh]

ARNOLD My poor child, how can you be so ridiculous?

Why, he hasn't a bob He's a perfectly commonplace young man It's so absurd I can't even be angry with you

ELIZABETH I've fallen desperately in love with him, Arnold

ARNOLD Well, you'd better fall desperately out

ELIZABETH He wants to marry me

ARNOLD I daresay he does He can go to hell

ELIZABETH It's no good talking like that

ARNOLD Is he your lover?

ELIZABETH No, certainly not

ARNOLD It shows that he's a mean skunk to take advantage of my hospitality to make love to you

ELIZABETH He's never even kissed me

ARNOLD I'd try telling that to the horse marines if I were you

ELIZABETH It's because I wanted to do nothing shabby that I told you straight out how things were

ARNOLD How long have you been thinking of this?

ELIZABETH I've been in love with Teddie ever since I knew him

ARNOLD And you never thought of me at all, I suppose

ELIZABETH Oh, yes, I did I was miserable But I can't help myself I wish I loved you, but I don't.

ARNOLD I recommend you to think very carefully before you do anything foolish

ELIZABETH I have thought very carefully

ARNOLD By God, I don't know why I don't give you a sound hiding I'm not sure if that wouldn't be the best thing to bring you to your senses

ELIZABETH Oh, Arnold, don't take it like that

ARNOLD How do you expect me to take it? You come to me quite calmly and say "I've had enough of you We've been married three years and I think I'd like to marry somebody else now Shall I break up your home? What a bore for you! Do you mind my divorcing you? It'll smash up your career, will it? What a pity!" Oh, no, my girl, I may be a fool, but I'm not a damned fool

ELIZABETH Teddie is leaving here by the first train to-morrow I warn you that I mean to join him as soon as he can make the necessary arrangements

ARNOLD Where is he?

ELIZABETH I don't know I suppose he's in his room

[ARNOLD goes to the door and calls

ARNOLD George!

[For a moment he walks up and down the room impatiently ELIZABETH watches him The FOOTMAN comes in

FOOTMAN Yes, sir

ARNOLD Tell Mr. Luton to come here at once

ELIZABETH Ask Mr. Luton if he wouldn't mind coming here for a moment

FOOTMAN Very good, madam

[Exit FOOTMAN

ELIZABETH What are you going to say to him?

ARNOLD That's my business

ELIZABETH I wouldn't make a scene if I were you

ARNOLD I'm not going to make a scene

[They wait in silence]

Why did you insist on my mother coming here?

ELIZABETH It seemed to me rather absurd to take up the attitude that I should be contaminated by her when

ARNOLD *[Interrupting]* When you were proposing to do exactly the same thing Well, now you've seen her what do you think of her? Do you think it's been a success? Is that the sort of woman a man would like his mother to be?

ELIZABETH I've been ashamed I've been so sorry It all seemed dreadful and horrible This morning I happened to notice a rose in the garden It was all overblown and bedraggled It looked like a painted old woman And I remembered that I'd looked at it a day or two ago It was lovely then, fresh and blooming and fragrant It may be hideous now, but that doesn't take away from the beauty it had once That was real

ARNOLD Poetry, by God! As if this were the moment for poetry!

[TEDDIE comes in He has changed into a dinner jacket]

TEDDIE *[To ELIZABETH]* Did you want me?

ARNOLD I sent for you

TEDDIE *looks from ARNOLD to ELIZABETH He sees that something has happened*

When would it be convenient for you to leave this house?

TEDDIE I was proposing to go to-morrow morning But I can very well go at once if you like.

ARNOLD I do like.

TEDDIE Very well Is there anything else you wish to say to me?

ARNOLD Do you think it was a very honourable thing to come down here and make love to my wife?

TEDDIE No, I don't I haven't been very happy about it That's why I wanted to go away

ARNOLD Upon my word you're cool

TEDDIE I'm afraid it's no good saying I'm sorry and that sort of thing You know what the situation is

ARNOLD Is it true that you want to marry Elizabeth?

TEDDIE Yes I should like to marry her as soon as ever I can

ARNOLD Have you thought of me at all? Has it struck you that you're destroying my home and breaking up my happiness?

TEDDIE I don't see how there could be much happiness for you if Elizabeth doesn't care for you

ARNOLD Let me tell you that I refuse to have my home broken up by a twopenny-halfpenny adventurer who takes advantage of a foolish woman I refuse to allow myself to be divorced I can't prevent my wife from going off with you if she's determined to make a damned fool of herself, but this I tell you nothing will induce me to divorce her

ELIZABETH Arnold, that would be monstrous.

TEDDIE We could force you

ARNOLD How?

TEDDIE If we went away together openly you'd have to bring an action

ARNOLD Twenty-four hours after you leave this house I shall go down to Brighton with a chorus-girl And neither you nor I will be able to get a divorce We've

had enough divorces in our family And now get out,
get out, get out!

[TEDDIE *looks uncertainly at ELIZABETH*

ELIZABETH [*With a little smile*] Don't bother about me I
shall be all right

ARNOLD Get out! Get out!

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

The Scene is the same

It is the night of the same day as that on which takes place the action of the second Act

CHAMPION-CHENEY and ARNOLD, both in dinner jackets, are discovered CHAMPION-CHENEY is seated ARNOLD walks restlessly up and down the room

C-C I think, if you'll follow my advice to the letter, you'll probably work the trick

ARNOLD I don't like it, you know It's against all my principles

C-C My dear Arnold, we all hope that you have before you a distinguished political career (You can't learn too soon that the most useful thing about a principle is that it can always be sacrificed to expediency)

ARNOLD But supposing it doesn't come off? Women are incalculable

C-C Nonsense! Men are romantic A woman will always sacrifice herself if you give her the opportunity It is her favourite form of self-indulgence

ARNOLD I never know whether you're a humorist or a cynic, father

C-C I'm neither, my dear boy, I'm merely a very truthful man But people are so unused to the truth that they're apt to mistake it for a joke or a sneer

ARNOLD [*Irritably*] It seems so unfair that this should happen to me

C-C Keep your head, my boy, and do what I tell you

[LADY KITTY and ELIZABETH come in LADY KITTY is in a gorgeous evening gown.

ELIZABETH Where is Lord Porteous?

C-C He's on the terrace He's smoking a cigar [*Going to window*] Hughie!

[*PORTEOUS comes in*]

PORTEOUS [*With a grunt*] Yes? Where's Mrs Shenstone?

ELIZABETH Oh, she had a headache She's gone to bed

[*When PORTEOUS comes in LADY KITTY with a very haughty air purses her lips and takes up an illustrated paper PORTEOUS gives her an irritated look, takes another illustrated paper and sits himself down at the other end of the room They are not on speaking terms*]

C-C Arnold and I have just been down to my cottage

ELIZABETH I wondered where you'd gone

C-C I came across an old photograph album this afternoon
I meant to bring it along before dinner, but I forgot, so
we went and fetched it

ELIZABETH Oh, do let me see it I love old photographs

[*He gives her the album, and she, sitting down, puts it on her knees and begins to turn over the pages He stands over her LADY KITTY and PORTEOUS take surreptitious glances at one another*]

C-C I thought it might amuse you to see what pretty women looked like five-and-thirty years ago That was the day of beautiful women.

ELIZABETH Do you think they were more beautiful then than they are now?

C-C Oh, much Now you see lots of pretty little things,
but very few beautiful women

ELIZABETH Aren't their clothes funny?

C-C [*Pointing to a photograph*] That's Mrs Langtry

ELIZABETH She has a lovely nose

C-C She was the most wonderful thing you ever saw
Dowagers used to jump on chairs in order to get a good

look at her when she came into a drawing-room I was riding with her once, and we had to have the gates of the livery stable closed when she was getting on her horse because the crowd was so great

ELIZABETH And who's that?

C-C Lady Lonsdale That's Lady Dudley.

ELIZABETH This is an actress, isn't it?

C-C It is, indeed Ellen Terry By George, how I loved that woman!

ELIZABETH [*With a smile*] Dear Ellen Terry!

C-C That's Bwabs I never saw a smarter man in my life And Oliver Montagu Henry Manners with his eye-glass

ELIZABETH Nice-looking, isn't he? And this?

C-C That's Mary Anderson I wish you could have seen her in *A Winter's Tale* Her beauty just took your breath away And look! There's Lady Randolph Bernal Osborne—the wittiest man I ever knew

ELIZABETH I think it's too sweet I love their absurd bustles and those tight sleeves

C-C What figures they had! In those days a woman wasn't supposed to be as thin as a rail and as flat as a pancake

ELIZABETH Oh, but aren't they laced in? How could they bear it?

C-C They didn't play golf then, and nonsense like that, you know They hunted, in a tall hat and a long black habit, and they were very gracious and charitable to the poor in the village.

ELIZABETH Did the poor like it?

C-C They had a very thin time if they didn't When they were in London they drove in the Park every afternoon, and they went to ten-course dinners, where they never

met anybody they didn't know And they had their box at the opera when Patti was singing or Madame Albani

ELIZABETH Oh, what a lovely little thing! Who on earth is that?

C-C That?

ELIZABETH She looks so fragile, like a piece of exquisite china, with all those furs on and her face up against her muff, and the snow falling

C-C Yes, there was quite a rage at that time for being taken in an artificial snowstorm

ELIZABETH What a sweet smile, so roguish and frank, and debonaire! Oh, I wish I looked like that Do tell me who it is

C-C Don't you know?

ELIZABETH No

C-C Why—it's Kitty

ELIZABETH Lady Kitty! [*To LADY KITTY*] Oh, my dear, do look It's too ravishing [*She takes the album over to her impulsively*] Why didn't you tell me you looked like that? Everybody must have been in love with you

[*LADY KITTY takes the album and looks at it Then she lets it slip from her hands and covers her face with her hands She is crying*]

[*In consternation*] My dear, what's the matter? Oh, what have I done? I'm so sorry

LADY KITTY Don't, don't talk to me Leave me alone It's stupid of me

[*ELIZABETH looks at her for a moment perplexed, then, turning round, slips her arm in CHAMPION-CHENEY'S and leads him out on to the terrace*]

ELIZABETH [*As they are going, in a whisper*] Did you do that on purpose?

[PORTEOUS *gets up and goes over to LADY KITTY He puts his hand on her shoulder They remain thus for a little while*

PORTEOUS I'm afraid I was very rude to you before dinner, Kitty

LADY KITTY [Taking his hand which is on her shoulder] It doesn't matter I'm sure I was very exasperating

PORTEOUS I didn't mean what I said, you know

LADY KITTY Neither did I

PORTEOUS Of course I know that I'd never have been Prime Minister

LADY KITTY How can you talk such nonsense, Hughie? No one would have had a chance if you'd remained in politics

PORTEOUS I haven't the character.

LADY KITTY You have more character than anyone I've ever met

PORTEOUS Besides, I don't know that I much wanted to be Prime Minister

LADY KITTY Oh, but I should have been so proud of you Of course you'd have been Prime Minister

PORTEOUS I'd have given you India, you know I think it would have been a very popular appointment

LADY KITTY I don't care twopence about India I'd have been quite content with Western Australia

PORTEOUS My dear, you don't think I'd have let you bury yourself in Western Australia?

LADY KITTY Or Barbadoes

PORTEOUS Never It sounds like a cure for flat feet I'd have kept you in London

[He picks up the album and is about to look at the photograph of Lady Kitty She puts her hand over it.

LADY KITTY No, don't look

[He takes her hand away]

PORTEOUS Don't be so silly

LADY KITTY Isn't it hateful to grow old?

PORTEOUS You know, you haven't changed much

LADY KITTY *[Enchanted]* Oh, Hughie, how can you talk such nonsense?

PORTEOUS Of course you're a little more mature, but that's all A woman's all the better for being rather mature

LADY KITTY Do you really think that?

PORTEOUS Upon my soul I do

LADY KITTY You're not saying it just to please me?

PORTEOUS No, no

LADY KITTY Let me look at the photograph again

[She takes the album and looks at the photograph complacently]

The fact is, if your bones are good, age doesn't really matter You'll always be beautiful

PORTEOUS *[With a little smile, almost as if he were talking to a child]* It was silly of you to cry

LADY KITTY It hasn't made my eyelashes run, has it?

PORTEOUS Not a bit

LADY KITTY It's very good stuff I use now. They don't stick together either

PORTEOUS Look here, Kitty, how much longer do you want to stay here?

LADY KITTY Oh, I'm quite ready to go whenever you like

PORTEOUS Clive gets on my nerves I don't like the way he keeps hanging about you.

LADY KITTY *[Surprised, rather amused, and delighted]* Hughie, you don't mean to say you're jealous of poor Clive?

PORTEOUS Of course I'm not jealous of him, but he does look at you in a way that I can't help thinking rather objectionable

LADY KITTY Hughie, you may throw me downstairs like Amy Robsart, you may drag me about the floor by the hair of my head, I don't care, you're jealous I shall never grow old

PORTEOUS Damn it all, the man was your husband.

LADY KITTY My dear Hughie, he never had your style Why, the moment you come into a room everyone looks and says, Who the devil is that?

PORTEOUS What? You think that, do you? Well, I dare say there's something in what you say These damned Radicals can say what they like, but, by God, Kitty, when a man's a gentleman—well, damn it all, you know what I mean

LADY KITTY I think Clive has degenerated dreadfully since we left him

PORTEOUS What do you say to making a bee line for Italy and going to San Michele?

LADY KITTY Oh, Hughie! It's years since we were there

PORTEOUS Wouldn't you like to see it again—just once more?

LADY KITTY Do you remember the first time we went? It was the most heavenly place I'd ever seen We'd only left England a month, and I said I'd like to spend all my life there

PORTEOUS Of course, I remember And in a fortnight it was yours, lock, stock and barrel.

LADY KITTY We were very happy there, Hughie.

PORTEOUS Let's go back once more

LADY KITTY I daren't It must be all peopled with the ghosts of our past One should never go again to a

place where one has been happy It would break my heart

PORTEOUS Do you remember how we used to sit on the terrace of the old castle and look at the Adriatic? We might have been the only people in the world, you and I, Kitty

LADY KITTY [*Tragically*] And we thought our love would last for ever

[*Enter CHAMPION-CHENEY*]

PORTEOUS Is there any chance of bridge this evening?

C-C I don't think we can make up a four

PORTEOUS What a nuisance that boy went away like that! He wasn't a bad player

C-C Teddie Luton?

LADY KITTY I think it was very funny his going without saying good-bye to anyone

C-C The young men of the present day are very casual

PORTEOUS I thought there was no train in the evening

C-C There isn't The last train leaves at 5.45

PORTEOUS How did he go then?

C-C He went

PORTEOUS Damned selfish I call it

LADY KITTY [*Intrigued*] Why did he go, Clive?

[*CHAMPION-CHENEY looks at her for a moment reflectively*]

C-C I have something very grave to say to you Elizabeth wants to leave Arnold

LADY KITTY Clive! What on earth for?

C-C She's in love with Teddie Luton That's why he went The men of my family are really very unfortunate.

PORTEOUS Does she want to run away with him

LADY KITTY [*With consternation*] My dear, what's to be done?

C C I think you can do a great deal

LADY KITTY P What?

C C Tell her, tell her what it means

[He looks at her fixedly She stares at him]

LADY KITTY Oh, no, no!

C-C She's a child Not for Arnold's sake For her sake
You must

LADY KITTY You don't know what you're asking

C-C Yes, I do

LADY KITTY Hughie, what shall I do?

PORTEOUS Do what you like I shall never blame you for anything

[The FOOTMAN comes in with a letter on a salver He hesitates on seeing that ELIZABETH is not in the room]

C-C What is it?

FOOTMAN I was looking for Mrs Champion-Cheney, sir

C-C She's not here Is that a letter?

FOOTMAN Yes, sir It's just been sent up from The Champion Arms

C-C Leave it I'll give it to Mrs Cheney

FOOTMAN Very good, sir

[He brings the tray to CLIVE, who takes the letter The FOOTMAN goes out]

PORTEOUS Is The Champion Arms the local pub?

C-C *[Looking at the letter]* It's by way of being a hotel, but I never heard of anyone staying there

LADY KITTY If there was no train I suppose he had to go there

C-C Great minds I wonder what he has to write about
[He goes to the door leading on to the garden] Elizabeth

ELIZABETH *[Outside]* Yes

C-C Here's a note for you

*[There is silence They wait for ELIZABETH to come
She enters]*

ELIZABETH It's lovely in the garden to-night

C-C They've just sent this up from The Champion Arms

ELIZABETH Thank you

*[Without embarrassment she opens the letter They
watch her while she reads it It covers three pages
She puts it away in her bag]*

LADY KITTY Hughie, I wish you'd fetch me a cloak I'd
like to take a little stroll in the garden, but after thirty
years in Italy I find these English summers rather chilly

*[Without a word PORTEOUS goes out ELIZABETH is
lost in thought]*

I want to talk to Elizabeth, Clive

C-C I'll leave you

[He goes out]

LADY KITTY What does he say?

ELIZABETH Who?

LADY KITTY Mr Luton

ELIZABETH *[Gives a little start Then she looks at LADY
KITTY]* They've told you?

LADY KITTY Yes And now they have I think I knew it
all along

ELIZABETH I don't expect you to have much sympathy for
me Arnold is your son

LADY KITTY So pitifully little

ELIZABETH I'm not suited for this sort of existence Arnold
wants me to take what he calls my place in Society
Oh, I get so bored with those parties in London All
those middle-aged painted women, in beautiful clothes,
lolling round ball-rooms with rather old young men
And the endless luncheons where they gossip about
so-and-so's love affairs

LADY KITTY Are you very much in love with Mr. Luton?

ELIZABETH I love him with all my heart

LADY KITTY And he?

ELIZABETH He's never cared for anyone but me. He never will.

LADY KITTY Will Arnold let you divorce him?

ELIZABETH No, he won't hear of it. He refuses even to divorce me.

LADY KITTY Why?

ELIZABETH He thinks a scandal will revive all the old gossip.

LADY KITTY Oh, my poor child.

ELIZABETH It can't be helped. I'm quite willing to accept the consequences.

LADY KITTY You don't know what it is to have a man tied to you only by his honour. When married people don't get on they can separate, but if they're not married it's impossible. It's a tie that only death can sever.

ELIZABETH If Teddie stopped caring for me I shouldn't want him to stay with me for five minutes.

LADY KITTY One says that when one's sure of a man's love, but when one isn't any more—oh, it's so different. In those circumstances one's got to keep a man's love. It's the only thing one has.

ELIZABETH I'm a human being. I can stand on my own feet.

LADY KITTY Have you any money of your own?

ELIZABETH None.

LADY KITTY Then how can you stand on your own feet? You think I'm a silly, frivolous woman, but I've learnt something in a bitter school. They can make what laws they like, they can give us the suffrage, but when you come down to bedrock it's the man who pays the piper who calls the tune. Woman will only be the equal of

man when she earns her living in the same way that he does

ELIZABETH [*Smiling*] It sounds rather funny to hear you talk like that

LADY KITTY A cook who marries a butler can snap her fingers in his face because she can earn just as much as he can But a woman in your position and a woman in mine will always be dependent on the men who keep them

ELIZABETH I don't want luxury You don't know how sick I am of all this beautiful furniture These over-decorated houses are like a prison in which I can't breathe When I drive about in a Callot frock and a Rolls-Royce I envy the shop-girl in a coat and skirt whom I see jumping on the tailboard of a bus

LADY KITTY You mean that if need be you could earn your own living?

ELIZABETH Yes

LADY KITTY What could you be? A nurse or a typist It's nonsense Luxury saps a woman's nerve And when she's known it once it becomes a necessity

ELIZABETH That depends on the woman

LADY KITTY When we're young we think we're different from everyone else, but when we grow a little older we discover we're all very much of a muchness

ELIZABETH You're very kind to take so much trouble about me

LADY KITTY It breaks my heart to think that you're going to make the same pitiful mistake that I made

ELIZABETH Oh, don't say it was that, don't, don't

LADY KITTY Look at me, Elizabeth, and look at Hughie Do you think it's been a success? If I had my time over again do you think I'd do it again? Do you think he would?

ELIZABETH You see, you don't know how much I love Teddie

LADY KITTY And do you think I didn't love Hughie? Do you think he didn't love me?

ELIZABETH I'm sure he did

LADY KITTY Oh, of course in the beginning it was heavenly We felt so brave and adventurous and we were so much in love The first two years were wonderful People cut me, you know, but I didn't mind I thought love was everything It *is* a little uncomfortable when you come upon an old friend and go towards her eagerly, so glad to see her, and are met with an icy stare

ELIZABETH Do you think friends like that are worth having?

LADY KITTY Perhaps they're not very sure of themselves Perhaps they're honestly shocked It's a test one had better not put one's friends to if one can help it It's rather bitter to find how few one has

ELIZABETH But one has some

LADY KITTY Yes, they ask you to come and see them when they're quite certain no one will be there who might object to meeting you Or else they say to you, My dear, you know I'm devoted to you, and I wouldn't mind at all, but my girl's growing up—I'm sure you understand, you won't think it unkind of me if I don't ask you to the house?

ELIZABETH [*Smiling*] That doesn't seem to me very serious

LADY KITTY At first I thought it rather a relief, because it threw Hughie and me together more But you know, men are very funny Even when they are in love they're not in love all day long They want change and recreation

ELIZABETH I'm not inclined to blame them for that, poor dears

LADY KITTY Then we settled in Florence And because we couldn't get the society we'd been used to, we became used to the society we could get Loose women and vicious men Snobs who liked to patronise people with a handle to their names Vague Italian princes who were glad to borrow a few francs from Hughie and seedy countesses who liked to drive with me in the Cascine And then Hughie began to hanker after his old life He wanted to go big game shooting, but I dared not let him go I was afraid he'd never come back

ELIZABETH But you knew he loved you

LADY KITTY Oh, my dear, what a blessed institution marriage is—for women, and what fools they are to meddle with it! The Church is so wise to take its stand on the indi—indi—

ELIZABETH Solu—

LADY KITTY Bility of marriage Believe me, it's no joke when you have to rely only on yourself to keep a man I could never afford to grow old My dear, I'll tell you a secret that I've never told a living soul

ELIZABETH What is that?

LADY KITTY My hair is not naturally this colour

ELIZABETH Really

LADY KITTY I touch it up You would never have guessed, would you?

ELIZABETH Never

LADY KITTY Nobody does My dear, it's white, prematurely of course, but white I always think it's a symbol of my life Are you interested in symbolism? I think it's too wonderful

ELIZABETH I don't think I know very much about it

LADY KITTY However tired I've been I've had to be brilliant and gay I've never let Hughie see the aching heart behind my smiling eyes

ELIZABETH [*Amused and touched*] You poor dear

LADY KITTY And when I saw he was attracted by someone else the fear and the jealousy that seized me! You see, I didn't dare make a scene as I should have done if I'd been married I had to pretend not to notice

ELIZABETH [*Taken aback*] But do you mean to say he fell in love with anyone else?

LADY KITTY Of course he did eventually

ELIZABETH [*Hardly knowing what to say*] You must have been very unhappy

LADY KITTY Oh, I was, dreadfully Night after night I sobbed my heart out when Hughie told me he was going to play cards at the club and I knew he was with that odious woman Of course, it wasn't as if there weren't plenty of men who were only too anxious to console me Men have always been attracted by me, you know

ELIZABETH Oh, of course, I can quite understand it

LADY KITTY But I had my self-respect to think of I felt that whatever Hughie did I would do nothing that I should regret

ELIZABETH You must be very glad now

LADY KITTY Oh, yes Notwithstanding all my temptations I've been absolutely faithful to Hughie in spirit

ELIZABETH I don't think I quite understand what you mean

LADY KITTY Well, there was a poor Italian boy, young Count Castel Giovanni, who was so desperately in love with me that his mother begged me not to be too cruel She was afraid he'd go into a consumption What could I do? And then, oh, years later, there was Antonio Melita He said he'd shoot himself unless I—well, you understand I couldn't let the poor boy shoot himself

ELIZABETH D'you think he really would have shot himself?

LADY KITTY Oh, one never knows, you know Those
Italians are so passionate He was really rather a lamb
He had such beautiful eyes

[ELIZABETH looks at her for a long time and a certain
horror seizes her of this dissolute, painted old woman

ELIZABETH [*Hoarsely*] Oh, but I think that's—dreadful

LADY KITTY Are you shocked? One sacrifices one's life
for love and then one finds that love doesn't last The
tragedy of love isn't death or separation One gets over
them The tragedy of love is indifference,

[ARNOLD comes in

ARNOLD Can I have a little talk with you, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH Of course

ARNOLD Shall we go for a stroll in the garden?

ELIZABETH If you like

LADY KITTY No, stay here I'm going out anyway

[Exit LADY KITTY

ARNOLD I want you to listen to me for a few minutes,
Elizabeth I was so taken aback by what you told me
just now that I lost my head I was rather absurd and
I beg your pardon I said things I regret

ELIZABETH Oh, don't blame yourself I'm sorry that I
should have given you occasion to say them

ARNOLD I want to ask you if you've quite made up your
mind to go

ELIZABETH Quite.

ARNOLD Just now I seem to have said all that I didn't want
to say and nothing that I did I'm stupid and tongue-
tied I never told you how deeply I loved you

ELIZABETH Oh, Arnold

ARNOLD Please let me speak now It's so very difficult
If I seemed absorbed in politics and the house, and so
on, to the exclusion of my interest in you, I'm dreadfully

sorry I suppose it was absurd of me to think you would take my great love for granted

ELIZABETH But, Arnold, I'm not reproaching you

ARNOLD I'm reproaching myself I've been tactless and neglectful But I do ask you to believe that it hasn't been because I didn't love you Can you forgive me?

ELIZABETH I don't think that there's anything to forgive

ARNOLD It wasn't till to-day when you talked of leaving me that I realised how desperately in love with you I was

ELIZABETH After three years?

ARNOLD I'm so proud of you I admire you so much When I see you at a party, so fresh and lovely, and everybody wondering at you, I have a sort of little thrill because you're mine, and afterwards I shall take you home

ELIZABETH Oh, Arnold, you're exaggerating

ARNOLD I can't imagine this house without you Life seems on a sudden all empty and meaningless Oh, Elizabeth, don't you love me at all?

ELIZABETH It's much better to be honest No

ARNOLD Doesn't my love mean anything to you?

ELIZABETH I'm very grateful to you I'm sorry to cause you pain What would be the good of my staying with you when I should be wretched all the time?

ARNOLD Do you love that man as much as all that? Does my unhappiness mean nothing to you?

ELIZABETH Of course it does It breaks my heart You see, I never knew I meant so much to you I'm so touched And I'm so sorry, Arnold, really sorry But I can't help myself

ARNOLD Poor child, it's cruel of me to torture you.

ELIZABETH Oh, Arnold, believe me, I have tried to make the best of it I've tried to love you, but I can't. After

all, one either loves or one doesn't Trying is no help
And now I'm at the end of my tether I can't help the
consequences—I must do what my whole self yearns for

ARNOLD My poor child, I'm so afraid you'll be unhappy
I'm so afraid you'll regret

ELIZABETH You must leave me to my fate I hope you'll
forget me and all the unhappiness I've caused you

ARNOLD [*There is a pause Arnold walks up and down the
room reflectively He stops and faces her*] If you love this
man and want to go to him I'll do nothing to prevent
you My only wish is to do what is best for you

ELIZABETH Arnold, that's awfully kind of you If I'm
treating you badly at least I want you to know that I'm
grateful for all your kindness to me

ARNOLD But there's one favour I should like you to do
me Will you?

ELIZABETH Oh, Arnold, of course I'll do anything I can

ARNOLD Teddie hasn't very much money You've been
used to a certain amount of luxury, and I can't bear to
think that you should do without anything you've had
It would kill me to think that you were suffering any
hardship or privation

ELIZABETH Oh, but Teddie can earn enough for our needs.
After all, we don't want much money

ARNOLD I'm afraid my mother's life hasn't been very easy,
but it's obvious that the only thing that's made it possible
is that Porteous was rich I want you to let me make
you an allowance of two thousand a year

ELIZABETH Oh, no, I couldn't think of it It's absurd

ARNOLD I beg you to accept it You don't know what a
difference it will make

ELIZABETH It's awfully kind of you, Arnold It humiliates
me to speak about it Nothing would induce me to take
a penny from you.

ARNOLD Well, you can't prevent me from opening an account at my bank in your name The money shall be paid in every quarter whether you touch it or not, and if you happen to want it, it will be there waiting for you

ELIZABETH You overwhelm me, Arnold There's only one thing I want you to do for me I should be very grateful if you would divorce me as soon as you possibly can

ARNOLD No, I won't do that But I'll give you cause to divorce me

ELIZABETH You!

ARNOLD Yes But of course you'll have to be very careful for a bit I'll put it through as quickly as possible, but I'm afraid you can't hope to be free for over six months

ELIZABETH But, Arnold, your seat and your political career!

ARNOLD Oh, well, my father gave up his seat under similar circumstances He's got along very comfortably without politics

ELIZABETH But they're your whole life

ARNOLD After all one can't have it both ways You can't serve God and Mammon If you want to do the decent thing you have to be prepared to suffer for it

ELIZABETH But I don't want you to suffer for it

ARNOLD At first I rather hesitated at the scandal But I daresay that was only weakness on my part In the circumstances I should have liked to keep out of the Divorce Court if I could

ELIZABETH Arnold, you're making me absolutely miserable

ARNOLD What you said before dinner was quite right It's nothing for a man, but it makes so much difference to a woman Naturally I must think of you first

ELIZABETH That's absurd. It's out of the question. Whatever there's to pay I must pay it

ARNOLD It's not very much I'm asking for, Elizabeth

ELIZABETH I'm taking everything from you

ARNOLD It's the only condition I make My mind is absolutely made up I will never divorce you, but I will enable you to divorce me

ELIZABETH Oh, Arnold, it's cruel to be so generous

ARNOLD It's not generous at all It's the only way I have of showing you how deep and passionate and sincere my love is for you

[There is a silence He holds out his hand]

Good-night I have a great deal of work to do before I go to bed

ELIZABETH Good-night

ARNOLD Do you mind if I kiss you?

ELIZABETH *[With agony]* Oh, Arnold!

[He gravely kisses her on the forehead and then goes out]

ELIZABETH stands lost in thought She is shattered

LADY KITTY and PORTEOUS come in LADY KITTY wears a cloak

LADY KITTY You're alone, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH That note you asked me about, Lady Kitty, from Teddie

LADY KITTY Yes?

ELIZABETH He wanted to have a talk with me before he went away He's waiting for me in the summer house by the tennis court Would Lord Porteous mind going down and asking him to come here?

PORTEOUS Certainly Certainly.

ELIZABETH Forgive me for troubling you But it's very important,

PORTEOUS No trouble at all.

[He goes out]

LADY KITTY Hughie and I will leave you alone.

ELIZABETH But I don't want to be left alone I want you to stay

LADY KITTY What are you going to say to him?

ELIZABETH [*Desperately*] Please don't ask me questions I'm so frightfully unhappy

LADY KITTY My poor child

ELIZABETH Oh, isn't life rotten? Why can't one be happy without making other people unhappy?

LADY KITTY I wish I knew how to help you I'm simply devoted to you [*She bunts about in her mind for something to do or say*] Would you like my lip-stick?

ELIZABETH [*Smiling through her tears*] Thanks I never use one

LADY KITTY Oh, but just try It's such a comfort when you're in trouble

[*Enter PORTEOUS and TEDDIE*]

PORTEOUS I brought him He said he'd be damned if he'd come

LADY KITTY When a lady sent for him? Are these the manners of the young men of to-day?

TEDDIE When you've been solemnly kicked out of a house once I think it seems rather pushing to come back again as though nothing had happened

ELIZABETH Teddie, I want you to be serious

TEDDIE Darling, I had such a rotten dinner at that pub If you ask me to be serious on the top of that I shall cry

ELIZABETH Don't be idiotic, Teddie [*Her voice faltering*] I'm so utterly wretched

[*He looks at her for a moment gravely*]

TEDDIE What is it?

ELIZABETH I can't come away with you, Teddie.

TEDDIE Why not?

ELIZABETH* [*Looking away in embarrassment*] I don't love you enough

TEDDIE Fiddle!

ELIZABETH [*With a flash of anger*] Don't say Fiddle to me

TEDDIE I shall say exactly what I like to you

ELIZABETH I won't be bullied

TEDDIE Now look here, Elizabeth, you know perfectly well that I'm in love with you, and I know perfectly well that you're in love with me So what are you talking nonsense for?

ELIZABETH [*Her voice breaking*] I can't say it if you're cross with me

TEDDIE [*Smiling very tenderly*] I'm not cross with you, silly

ELIZABETH It's harder still when you're being rather an owl

TEDDIE [*With a chuckle*] Am I mistaken in thinking you're not very easy to please?

ELIZABETH Oh, it's monstrous I was all wrought up and ready to do anything, and now you've thoroughly put me out I feel like a great big fat balloon that some one has put a long pin into [*With a sudden look at him*] Have you done it on purpose?

TEDDIE Upon my soul I don't know what you're talking about

ELIZABETH I wonder if you're really much cleverer than I think you are

TEDDIE. [*Taking her hands and making her sit down*] Now tell me exactly what you want to say By the way, do you want Lady Kitty and Lord Porteous to be here?

ELIZABETH Yes

LADY KITTY Elizabeth asked us to stay

TEDDIE Oh, I don't mind, bless you I only thought you might feel rather in the way

LADY KITTY [*Frigidly*] A gentlewoman never feels in the way, Mr Luton

TEDDIE Won't you call me Teddie? Everybody does, you know

[LADY KITTY *tries to give him a withering look, but she finds it very difficult to prevent herself from smiling*

TEDDIE *strokes ELIZABETH's hands She draws them away*

ELIZABETH No, don't do that Teddie, it wasn't true when I said I didn't love you Of course I love you But Arnold loves me, too. I didn't know how much

TEDDIE What has he been saying to you?

ELIZABETH He's been very good to me, and so kind I didn't know he could be so kind. He offered to let me divorce him

TEDDIE That's very decent of him.

ELIZABETH But don't you see, it ties my hands How can I accept such a sacrifice? I should never forgive myself if I profited by his generosity

TEDDIE If another man and I were devilish hungry and there was only one mutton chop between us, and he said, You eat it, I wouldn't waste a lot of time arguing I'd wolf it before he changed his mind

ELIZABETH Don't talk like that. It maddens me I'm trying to do the right thing

TEDDIE You're not in love with Arnold, you're in love with me It's idiotic to sacrifice your life for a slushy sentiment

ELIZABETH After all, I did marry him

TEDDIE Well, you made a mistake A marriage without love is no marriage at all

ELIZABETH *I made the mistake* Why should he suffer for it? If anyone has to suffer it's only right that I should

TEDDIE What sort of a life do you think it would be with him? When two people are married it's very difficult for one of them to be unhappy without making the other unhappy too

ELIZABETH I can't take advantage of his generosity

TEDDIE I daresay he'll get a lot of satisfaction out of it

ELIZABETH You're being beastly, Teddie He was simply wonderful I never knew he had it in him He was really noble

TEDDIE You are talking rot, Elizabeth

ELIZABETH I wonder if you'd be capable of acting like that

TEDDIE Acting like what?

ELIZABETH What would you do if I were married to you and came and told you I loved somebody else and wanted to leave you?

TEDDIE You have very pretty blue eyes, Elizabeth I'd black first one and then the other And after that we'd see

ELIZABETH You damned brutel

TEDDIE I've often thought I wasn't quite a gentleman. Had it never struck you?

[They look at one another for a while]

ELIZABETH You know, you are taking an unfair advantage of me I feel as if I came to you quite unsuspectingly and when I wasn't looking you kicked me on the shins

TEDDIE Don't you think we'd get on rather well together?

PORTEOUS Elizabeth's a fool if she don't stick to her husband It's bad enough for the man, but for the woman—it's damnable. I hold no brief for Arnold. He

plays bridge like a foot Saving your presence, Kitty,
I think he's a prig

LADY KITTY Poor dear, his father was at his age I daresay
he'll grow out of it

PORTEOUS But you stick to him, Elizabeth, stick to him
Man is a gregarious animal We're members of a herd
If we break the herd's laws we suffer for it And we suffer
damnably

LADY KITTY Oh, Elizabeth, my dear child, don't go It's
not worth it It's not worth it I tell you that, and I've
sacrificed everything to love

[*A pause*]

ELIZABETH I'm afraid

TEDDIE [*In a whisper*] Elizabeth

ELIZABETH I can't face it It's asking too much of me
Let's say good-bye to one another, Teddie It's the only
thing to do And have pity on me I'm giving up all
my hope of happiness

[*He goes up to her and looks into her eyes*]

TEDDIE But I wasn't offering you happiness I don't think
my sort of love tends to happiness I'm jealous I'm
not a very easy man to get on with I'm often out of
temper and irritable. I should be fed to the teeth with
you sometimes, and so would you be with me I daresay
we'd fight like cat and dog, and sometimes we'd hate
each other Often you'd be wretched and bored stiff
and lonely, and often you'd be frightfully homesick, and
then you'd regret all you'd lost Stupid women would
be rude to you because we'd run away together And
some of them would cut you I don't offer you peace
and quietness I offer you unrest and anxiety. I don't
offer you happiness I offer you love.

ELIZABETH [*Stretching out her arms*] You hateful creature,
I absolutely adore you

[*He throws his arms round her and kisses her passionately on the lips*]

LADY KITTY Of course the moment he said he'd give her a black eye I knew it was finished

PORTEOUS [*Good-humouredly*] You are a fool, Kitty

LADY KITTY I know I am, but I can't help it

TEDDIE Let's make a bolt for it now

ELIZABETH Shall we?

TEDDIE This minute.

PORTEOUS You're damned fools, both of you, damned fools If you like you can have my car

TEDDIE That's awfully kind of you As a matter of fact, I got it out of the garage It's just along the drive

PORTEOUS [*Indignantly*] How do you mean, you got it out of the garage?

TEDDIE Well, I thought there'd be a lot of bother, and it seemed to me the best thing would be for Elizabeth and me not to stand upon the order of our going, you know Do it now An excellent motto for a business man

PORTEOUS Do you mean to say you were going to steal my car

TEDDIE Not exactly I was only going to bolshevisise it, so to speak

PORTEOUS I'm speechless I'm absolutely speechless

TEDDIE Hang it all, I couldn't carry Elizabeth all the way to London She's so damned plump

ELIZABETH You dirty dog!

PORTEOUS [*Spluttering*] Well, well, well! [*Helplessly*] I like him, Kitty, it's no good pretending I don't I like him

TEDDIE The moon's shining, Elizabeth We'll drive all through the night

PORTEOUS They'd better go to San Michele I'll wire to have it got ready for them

LADY KITTY That's where we went when Hughie and I
[*Faltering*] Oh, you dear things, how I envy you

PORTEOUS [*Mopping his eyes*] Now don't cry, Kitty Confound you, don't cry

TEDDIE Come, darling

ELIZABETH But I can't go like this

TEDDIE Nonsense! Lady Kitty will lend you her cloak Won't you?

LADY KITTY [*Taking it off*] You're capable of tearing it off my back if I don't

TEDDIE [*Putting the cloak on ELIZABETH*] And we'll buy you a tooth-brush in London in the morning

LADY KITTY She must write a note for Arnold, I'll put it on her pincushion.

TEDDIE Pincushion be blowed Come, darling We'll drive through the dawn and through the sunrise

ELIZABETH [*Kissing LADY KITTY and PORTEOUS*] Good-bye Good-bye

[*TEDDIE stretches out his hand and she takes it Hand in hand they go out into the night*]

LADY KITTY Oh, Hughie, how it all comes back to me Will they suffer all we suffered? And have we suffered all in vain?

PORTEOUS My dear, I don't know that in life it matters so much what you do as what you are No one can learn by the experience of another because no circumstances are quite the same If we made rather a hash of things perhaps it was because we were rather trivial people You can do anything in this world if you're prepared to take the consequences, and consequences depend on character

[Enter CHAMPION-CHENEY, rubbing his hands. He is as pleased as Punch]

C-C Well, I think I've settled the hash of that young man
LADY KITTY Oh?

C-C You have to get up very early in the morning to get
the better of your humble servant

[There is the sound of a car starting]

LADY KITTY What is that?

C-C It sounds like a car. I expect it's your chauffeur
taking one of the maids for a joy-ride

PORTEOUS Whose hash are you talking about?

C-C Mr Edward Luton's, my dear Hughie. I told Arnold
exactly what to do and he's done it. What makes a
prison? Why, bars and bolts. Remove them and a
prisoner won't want to escape. Clever, I flatter myself

PORTEOUS You were always that, Clive, but at the moment
you're obscure

C-C I told Arnold to go to Elizabeth and tell her she
could have her freedom. I told him to sacrifice himself
all along the line. I know what women are. The moment
every obstacle was removed to her marriage with Teddie
Luton, half the allurements were gone

LADY KITTY Arnold did that?

C-C He followed my instructions to the letter. I've just
seen him. She's shaken. I'm willing to bet five hundred
pounds to a penny that she won't bolt. A downy old
bird, eh? Downy's the word. Downy

[He begins to laugh. They laugh too. Presently they are all three in fits of laughter]

THE END

THE CONSTANT WIFE

A COMEDY
in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

CONSTANCE

JOHN MIDDLETON, F R C S

BERNARD KERSAL

MRS CULVER

MARIE-LOUISE

MARTHA

BARBARA

MORTIMER DURHAM

BENTLEY

*The action of the play takes place in John's
house in Harley Street.*

THE CONSTANT WIFE

THE FIRST ACT

SCENE CONSTANCE'S *drawing-room* *It is a room furnished with singularly good taste* CONSTANCE *has a gift for decoration and has made this room of hers both beautiful and comfortable*

It is afternoon

MRS CULVER *is seated alone* *She is an elderly lady with a pleasant face and she is dressed in walking costume* The door is opened and BENTLEY the butler introduces MARTHA CULVER *This is her daughter and a fine young woman*

BENTLEY Miss Culver

[*He goes out*]

MARTHA [*With astonishment*] Mother

MRS CULVER* [*Very calmly*] Yes, darling

MARTHA You're the last person I expected to find here
You never told me you were coming to see Constance

MRS CULVER [*Good-humouredly*] I didn't intend to till I saw in your beady eye that *you* meant to I thought I'd just as soon be here first

MARTHA Bentley says she's out.

MRS CULVER Yes Are you going to wait?

MARTHA Certainly

MRS CULVER Then I will, too.

MARTHA That'll be very nice

MRS CULVER Your words are cordial, but your tone is slightly frigid, my dear

MARTHA. I don't know what you mean by that, mother.

MRS CULVER My dear, we've known one another a great many years, haven't we? More than we always find it convenient to mention

MARTHA Not at all I'm thirty-two I'm not in the least ashamed of my age Constance is thirty-six

MRS CULVER And yet we still think it worth while to be a trifle disingenuous with one another Our sex takes a natural pleasure in dissimulation

MARTHA I don't think anyone can accuse me of not being frank

MRS CULVER Frankness of course is the pose of the moment It is often a very effective screen for one's thoughts

MARTHA I think you're being faintly disagreeable to me, mother

MRS CULVER I, on the other hand, think you're inclined to be decidedly foolish

MARTHA Because I want to tell Constance something she ought to know?

MRS CULVER Ah, I *was* right then And it's to tell her that you've broken an engagement, and left three wretched people to play cut-throat

MARTHA It is

MRS CULVER And may I ask why you think Constance ought to know?

MARTHA Why? Why? Why? That's one of those questions that really don't need answering

MRS CULVER I've always noticed that the questions that really don't need answering are the most difficult to answer

MARTHA It isn't at all difficult to answer She ought to know the truth because it's the truth

MRS CULVER Of course truth is an excellent thing, but before one tells it one should be quite sure that one does

so for the advantage of the person who hears it rather than for one's own self-satisfaction

MARTHA Mother, Constance is a very unhappy person

MRS CULVER Nonsense She eats well, sleeps well, dresses well, and she's losing weight No woman can be unhappy in those circumstances

MARTHA Of course if you won't understand it's no use my trying to make you You're a darling, but you're the most unnatural mother Your attitude simply amazes me

[*The door opens and BENTLEY ushers in Mrs FAWCETT*
MRS FAWCETT *is a trim, business-like woman of forty*

BENTLEY Mrs Fawcett

MRS CULVER Oh, Barbara, how very nice to see you

BARBARA [*Going up to her and kissing her*] Bentley told me you were here and Constance was out What are you doing?

MRS CULVER Bickering

BARBARA What about?

MRS CULVER Constance

MARTHA I'm glad you've come, Barbara . Did you know that John was having an affair with Marie-Louise?

BARBARA I hate giving a straight answer to a straight question

MARTHA I suppose everyone knows but us How long have you known? They say it's been going on for months I can't think how it is we've only just heard it

MRS CULVER [*Ironically*] It speaks very well for human nature that with the masses of dear friends we have it's only to-day that one of them broke the news to us

BARBARA Perhaps the dear friend only heard it this morning

MARTHA At first I refused to believe it

MRS CULVER Only quite, quite at first, darling You surrendered to the evidence with an outraged alacrity that took my breath away

MARTHA Of course I put two and two together After the first shock I understood everything I'm only astonished that it never occurred to me before

BARBARA Are you very much upset, Mrs Culver?

MRS CULVER Not a bit I was brought up by a very strict mother to believe that men were naturally wicked I am seldom surprised at what they do and never upset

MARTHA Mother has been simply maddening She treats it as though it didn't matter a row of pins

MRS CULVER Constance and John have been married for fifteen years John is a very agreeable man I've sometimes wondered whether he was any more faithful to his wife than most husbands, but as it was really no concern of mine I didn't let my mind dwell on it

MARTHA Is Constance your daughter or is she not your daughter?

MRS CULVER You certainly have a passion for straight questions, my dear The answer is yes

MARTHA And are you prepared to sit there quietly and let her husband grossly deceive her with her most intimate friend?

MRS CULVER So long as she doesn't know I can't see that she's any the worse Marie-Louise is a nice little thing, silly of course, but that's what men like, and if John is going to deceive Constance it's much better that it should be with someone we all know

MARTHA [To BARBARA] Did you ever hear a respectable woman—and mother is respectable . . .

MRS CULVER [*Interrupting*] Oh, quite.

MARTHA Talk like that?

BARBARA You think that something ought to be done about it?

MARTHA I am determined that something shall be done about it

MRS CULVER Well, my dear, I'm determined that there's at least one thing you shan't do and that is to tell Constance

BARBARA [*A trifle startled*] Is that what you want to do?

MARTHA Somebody ought to tell her If mother won't I must

BARBARA I'm extremely fond of Constance Of course I've known what was going on for a long time and I've been dreadfully worried

MARTHA John has put her into an odious position No man has the right to humiliate his wife as he has humiliated Constance He's made her perfectly ridiculous

MRS CULVER If women were ridiculous because their husbands are unfaithful to them, there would surely be a great deal more merriment in the world than there is

BARBARA [*Delighted to have a good gossip*] You know they were lunching together to-day?

MARTHA We hadn't heard that But they were dining together the night before last

MRS CULVER [*Brightly*] We know what they had to eat for dinner. Do you know what they had to eat for luncheon?

MARTHA Mother

MRS CULVER. Well, I thought she seemed rather uppish about the lunch

MARTHA You have no sense of decency, mother

MRS CULVER Oh, my dear, don't talk to me about decency
Decency died with dear Queen Victoria.

BARBARA [*To MRS CULVER*] But you can't approve of John having an open and flagrant intrigue with Constance's greatest friend

MRS CULVER It may be that with advancing years my arteries have hardened I am unable to attach any great importance to the philanderings of men I think it's their nature John is a very hard-working surgeon If he likes to lunch and dine with a pretty woman now and then I don't think he's much to blame It must be very tiresome to have three meals a day with the same woman for seven days a week I'm a little bored myself at seeing Martha opposite me at the dinner-table And men can't stand boredom as well as women

MARTHA I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, mother

BARBARA [*Significantly*] But they're not only lunching and dining together

MRS CULVER You fear the worst, my dear?

BARBARA [*With solemnity*] I know the worst

MRS CULVER I always think that's such a comfort With closed doors and no one listening to us, so long as a man is kind and civil to his wife do you blame him very much if he strays occasionally from the narrow path of virtue?

MARTHA Do you mean to say that you attach no importance to husbands and wives keeping their marriage vows?

MRS CULVER I think wives should

BARBARA But that's grossly unfair Why should *they* any more than men?

MRS CULVER Because on the whole they like it We ascribe a great deal of merit to ourselves because we're faithful to our husbands I don't believe we deserve it for a minute We're naturally faithful creatures and we're faithful because we have no particular inclination to be anything else.

BARBARA I wonder

MRS CULVER My dear, you are a widow and perfectly free
Have you really had any great desire to do anything that
the world might say you shouldn't?

BARBARA I have my business When you work hard eight
hours a day you don't much want to be bothered with
love In the evening the tired business woman wants
to go to a musical comedy or play cards She doesn't
want to be worried with adoring males

MARTHA By the way, how is your business?

BARBARA Growing by leaps and bounds As a matter of
fact I came here to-day to ask Constance if she would
like to come in with me

MRS CULVER Why should she? John earns plenty of
money

BARBARA Well, I thought if things came to a crisis she might
like to know that her independence was assured

MRS CULVER Oh, you want them to come to a crisis, too?

BARBARA No, of course I don't But, you know, they can't
go on like this It's a miracle that Constance hasn't
heard yet She's bound to find out soon

MRS CULVER I suppose it's inevitable

MARTHA I hope she'll find out as quickly as possible I
still think it's mother's duty to tell her

MRS CULVER Which I have no intention of doing

MARTHA And if mother won't I think I ought

MRS CULVER Which I have no intention of permitting

MARTHA He's humiliated her beyond endurance Her
position is intolerable I have no words to express my
opinion of Marie-Louise, and the first time I see her I
shall tell her exactly what I think of her She's a horrid,
ungrateful, mean and contemptible little cat

BARBARA Anyhow, I think it would be a comfort to Constance to know that if anything happened she has me to turn to

MRS CULVER But John would make her a handsome allowance He's a very generous man

MARTHA [*Indignantly*] Do you think Constance would accept it?

BARBARA Martha's quite right, Mrs Culver No woman in those circumstances would take a penny of his money

MRS CULVER That's what she'd say But she'd take care that her lawyer made the best arrangement he could Few men know with what ingenuity we women can combine the disinterested gesture with a practical eye for the main chance

BARBARA Aren't you rather cynical, Mrs Culver?

MRS CULVER I hope not But when women are alone together I don't see why they shouldn't tell the truth now and then It's a rest from the weary round of pretending to be something that we quite well know we're not

MARTHA [*Stiffly*] I'm not aware that I've ever pretended to be anything I wasn't

MRS CULVER I dare say not, my dear But I've always thought you were a little stupid You take after your poor father Constance and I have the brains of the family

[CONSTANCE comes into the room She is a handsome woman of six and thirty She has been out and wears a hat

BARBARA [*Eagerly*] Constance

CONSTANCE I'm so sorry I wasn't in How nice of you all to wait How are you, mother darling?

[*She kisses them one after another*

MARTHA What have you been doing all day, Constance?

CONSTANCE Oh, I've been shopping with Marie-Louise
She's just coming up

BARBARA [*With dismay*] Is she here?

CONSTANCE Yes She's telephoning

MARTHA [*Ironically*] You and Marie-Louise are quite
inseparable

CONSTANCE I like her She amuses me

MARTHA Were you lunching together?

CONSTANCE No, she was lunching with a beau

MARTHA [*With a glance at MRS CULVER*] Oh, really
[*Breezily*] John always comes home to luncheon,
doesn't he?

CONSTANCE [*With great frankness*] When he doesn't have
to be at the hospital too early

MARTHA Was he lunching with you to-day?

CONSTANCE No He was engaged

MARTHA Where?

CONSTANCE Good heavens, I don't know When you've
been married as long as I have you never ask your
husband where he's going

MARTHA I don't know why not

CONSTANCE [*Smiling*] Because he might take it into his
head to ask *you*

MRS CULVER And also because if you're a wise woman you
have confidence in your husband

CONSTANCE John has never given me a moment's uneasi-
ness yet

MARTHA You're lucky

CONSTANCE [*With her tongue in her cheek*] Or wise

[*MARIE-LOUISE appears She is a very pretty little
thing, beautifully dressed, of the clinging, large-eyed
type*]

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, I didn't know there was a party

MRS CULVER Martha and I are just going

CONSTANCE You know my mother, Marie-Louise

MARIE-LOUISE Of course I do

CONSTANCE She's a very nice mother

MRS CULVER With her head screwed on the right way and
very active for her years

[MARIE-LOUISE *kisses* BARBARA and MARTHA

MARIE-LOUISE How do you do

MARTHA [*Looking at her dress*] That's new, isn't it, Marie-
Louise?

MARIE-LOUISE Yes, I've never had it on before

MARTHA Oh, did you put it on because you were lunching
with a beau?

MARIE-LOUISE What makes you think I was lunching with
a beau?

MARTHA Constance told me so

CONSTANCE It was only a guess on my part [*To MARIE-
LOUISE*] When we met I noticed that your eyes were
shining and you had that pleased, young look a woman
always gets when some one has been telling her she's
the most adorable thing in the world.

MARTHA Tell us who it was, Marie-Louise

CONSTANCE Do nothing of the kind, Marie-Louise Keep
it a secret and give us something to gossip about

BARBARA How is your husband, dear?

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, he's very well I've just been tele-
phoning to him.

BARBARA I never saw anyone adore his wife so obviously
as he adores you

MARIE-LOUISE: Yes, he's sweet, isn't he?

BARBARA But doesn't it make you a little nervous sometimes? It must be nerve-racking to be obliged to live up to such profound devotion. It would be a dreadful shock if he ever found out that you were not everything he thought you.

CONSTANCE [*Charmingly*] But Marie-Louise is everything he thinks her.

MARIE-LOUISE And even if I weren't I think it would require more than the evidence of his eyes to persuade him.

CONSTANCE Listen. There's John. [*She goes to the door and calls*] John! John!

JOHN [*Downstairs*] Hulloo.

CONSTANCE Are you coming up? Marie-Louise is here.

JOHN Yes, I'm just coming.

CONSTANCE He's been operating all the afternoon. I expect he's tired out.

MARTHA [*With a look at MARIE-LOUISE*] I dare say he only had a sandwich for luncheon.

[*JOHN comes in. He is a tall, spare man of about forty.*]

JOHN Good Lord, I never saw such a lot of people. How is my mother-in-law?

MRS CULVER Mother-in-lawish.

JOHN [*Kissing her—to BARBARA*] You know, I only married Constance because her mother wouldn't have me.

MRS CULVER I was too young at the time to marry a boy twenty years younger than myself.

CONSTANCE It hasn't prevented you from flirting outrageously with the creature ever since. It's lucky I'm not a jealous woman.

JOHN What have you been doing all day, darling?

CONSTANCE I've been shopping with Marie-Louise.

JOHN [*Shaking hands with MARIE-LOUISE*] Oh, how do you do? Did you lunch together?

MARTHA No, she lunched with a beau

JOHN I wish it had been me [*To MARIE-LOUISE*] What have you been doing with yourself lately? We haven't seen you for ages

MARIE-LOUISE You're never about Constance and I almost live in one another's pockets

JOHN How's that rich husband of yours?

MARIE-LOUISE I've just been speaking to him Isn't it a bore, he's got to go down to Birmingham for the night.

CONSTANCE You'd better come and dine with us

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, it's awfully nice of you But I'm tired out I shall just go to bed and have an egg

JOHN I was just going to tell you, Constance I shan't be in this evening I've got an acute appendix to do

CONSTANCE Oh, what a nuisance

MARTHA You've got a wonderful profession, John If you ever want to do anything or go anywhere you've only got to say you've got an operation and no one can prove it's a lie

CONSTANCE Oh, my dear, you mustn't put suspicions into my innocent head It would never occur to John to be so deceitful [*To JOHN*] Would it?

JOHN I think I'd have to go an awful long way before I managed to deceive you, darling

CONSTANCE. [*With a little smile*] Sometimes I think you're right

MARIE-LOUISE. I do like to see a husband and wife so devoted to one another as you and John. You've been married fifteen years, haven't you?

JOHN Yes And it doesn't seem a day too much.

MARIE-LOUISE Well, I must be running along I'm late already Good-bye, darling Good-bye, Mrs Culver

CONSTANCE Good-bye, darling We've had such a nice afternoon

MARIE-LOUISE [*Giving her hand to JOHN*] Good-bye

JOHN Oh, I'll come downstairs with you

MARTHA I was just going, Marie-Louise I'll come with you

MARIE-LOUISE [*With presence of mind*] John, I wonder if you'd mind looking at my knee for a minute It's been rather painful for the last day or two

JOHN Of course not Come into my consulting-room These knee-caps are troublesome things when you once get them out of order

MARTHA [*Firmly*] I'll wait for you You won't be long, will you? We might share a taxi

MARIE-LOUISE I've got my car

MARTHA Oh, how nice! You can give me a lift then

MARIE-LOUISE Of course I shall be delighted

[*JOHN opens the door for MARIE-LOUISE She goes out and he follows her CONSTANCE has watched this little scene coolly, but with an alert mind*

MARTHA. What is the matter with her knee?

CONSTANCE It slips.

MARTHA What happens then?

CONSTANCE She slips too

MARTHA Are you never jealous of these women who come and see John in his consulting-room?

CONSTANCE He always has a nurse within call in case they should attempt to take liberties with him.

MARTHA. [*Amiably*] Is the nurse there now?

CONSTANCE. And anyway I can't help thinking that the sort

of woman who wants to be made love to in a consulting-room with a lively odour of antiseptics is the sort of woman who wears horrid undies I could never bring myself to be jealous of her

MARTHA Marie-Louise gave me two of her chemises to copy only the other day

CONSTANCE Oh, did she give you the cerise one with the Irish lace insertions? I thought that sweet I've copied that

BARBARA It's true that Marie-Louise is very pretty

CONSTANCE Marie-Louise is a darling But she and John have known each other far too long John likes her of course, but he says she has no brain

MARTHA Men don't always say what they think

CONSTANCE Fortunately, or we shouldn't always know what they feel

MARTHA Don't you think John has any secrets from you?

CONSTANCE I'm sure of it But of course a good wife always pretends not to know the little things her husband wishes to keep hidden from her That is an elementary rule in matrimonial etiquette

MARTHA Don't forget that men were deceivers ever

CONSTANCE My dear, you talk like a confirmed spinster What woman was ever deceived that didn't want to be? Do you really think that men are mysterious? They're children Why, my dear, John at forty isn't nearly so grown up as Helen at fourteen.

BARBARA How is your girl, Constance?

CONSTANCE Oh, she's very well She loves boarding-school, you know They're like little boys, men Sometimes of course they're rather naughty and you have to pretend to be angry with them They attach so much importance to such entirely unimportant things that it's really touching And they're so helpless Have you

never nursed a man when he's ill? It wrings your heart It's just like a dog or a horse They haven't got the sense to come in out of the rain, poor darlings They have all the charming qualities that accompany general incompetence They're sweet and good and silly and tiresome and selfish You can't help liking them, they're so ingenuous and so simple They have no complexity or finesse I think they're sweet, but it's absurd to take them seriously You're a wise woman, mother What do you think?

MRS CULVER I think you're not in love with your husband
CONSTANCE What nonsense

[JOHN comes in]

JOHN Marie-Louise is waiting for you, Martha I've just put a little bandage round her knee

CONSTANCE I hope you weren't rough

MARTHA [*To CONSTANCE*] Good-bye, dear Are you coming, mother?

MRS CULVER Not just yet

MARTHA Good-bye, Barbara

[MARTHA and JOHN go out]

BARBARA Constance, I've got a suggestion to make to you You know that my business has been growing by leaps and bounds and I simply cannot get along alone any more I was wondering if you'd like to come in with me

CONSTANCE Oh, my dear, I'm not a business woman

BARBARA You've got marvellous taste and you have ideas You could do all the decorating and I'd confine myself to buying and selling furniture

CONSTANCE But I've got no capital

BARBARA I've got all the capital I want. I must have help and I know no one more suitable than you We'd go

fifty-fifty and I think I can promise that you'd make a thousand to fifteen hundred a year

CONSTANCE I've been an idle woman so long I think I'd find it dreadfully hard to work eight hours a day

BARBARA Won't you think it over? It's very interesting, you know You're naturally energetic Don't you get bored with doing nothing all the time?

CONSTANCE I don't think John would like it After all, it would look as though he couldn't afford to support me

BARBARA Oh, not nowadays, surely There's no reason why a woman shouldn't have a career just as much as a man

CONSTANCE I think my career is looking after John—running a house for him, entertaining his friends and making him happy and comfortable

BARBARA Don't you think it rather a mistake to put all your eggs in one basket? Supposing that career failed you?

CONSTANCE Why should it?

BARBARA Of course I hope it won't But men, you know, are fluctuating and various Independence is a very good thing, and a woman who stands on her own feet financially can look upon the future with a good deal of confidence

CONSTANCE It's sweet of you, but so long as John and I are happy together I think I should be a fool to do anything that would vex him

BARBARA. Of course I'm in no immediate hurry One never knows what the future will bring forth I want you to know that if you change your mind the job is open to you I don't think I shall ever find any one so competent as you. You have only to say the word

CONSTANCE Oh, Barbara, you are kind to me It's a splendid offer and I'm ever so grateful to you Don't think me horrid if I say I hope I shall never need to accept it

BARBARA Of course not Good-bye, darling

CONSTANCE Good-bye, dear

[They kiss, and BARBARA goes out CONSTANCE rings the bell]

MRS CULVER Are you quite happy, dear?

CONSTANCE Oh, quite Don't I look it?

MRS CULVER I'm bound to say you do So far as I can judge by the look of you I should say you haven't a trouble in the world

CONSTANCE You'd be wrong My cook has given notice and she makes the best meringues I've ever eaten

MRS CULVER I like John

CONSTANCE So do I He has all the solid qualities that make a man a good husband, an agreeable temper, a sense of humour and an entire indifference to petty extravagance

MRS CULVER How right you are, darling, to realise that those are the solid qualities

CONSTANCE It's not the seven deadly virtues that make a man a good husband, but the three hundred pleasing amiabilities

MRS CULVER Of course one has to compromise in life One has to make the best of things One mustn't expect too much from people If one wants to be happy in one's own way one must let others be happy in theirs If one can't get this, that and the other the wise thing is to make up one's mind to do without it The great thing is not to let vanity warp one's reasonable point of view

CONSTANCE Mother, mother, pull yourself together

MRS CULVER: Everybody's so clever nowadays They see everything but the obvious I've discovered that I only have to say it quite simply in order to be thought a most original and amusing old lady.

CONSTANCE Spare me, darling

MRS CULVER [*Affectionately*] If at any time anything went wrong with you, you would tell your mother, wouldn't you?

CONSTANCE Of course

MRS CULVER I hate the thought that you might be unhappy and let a foolish pride prevent you from letting me console and advise you

CONSTANCE [*With feeling*] It wouldn't, mother dear

MRS CULVER I had rather an odd experience the other day A little friend of mine came to see me and told me that her husband was neglecting her I asked her why she told me and not her own mother She said that her mother had never wanted her to marry and it would mortify her now to have to say that she had made a mistake

CONSTANCE Oh, well, John never neglects me, mother

MRS CULVER Of course I gave her a good talking to She didn't get much sympathy from me

CONSTANCE [*With a smile*] That was very unkind, wasn't it?

MRS CULVER I have my own ideas about marriage If a man neglects his wife it's her own fault, and if he's systematically unfaithful to her in nine cases out of ten she only has herself to blame

CONSTANCE [*Ringing the bell*] Systematically is a grim word

MRS CULVER No sensible woman attaches importance to an occasional slip Time and chance are responsible for that

CONSTANCE And shall we say, masculine vanity?

MRS CULVER I told my little friend that if her husband was unfaithful to her it was because he found other women

more attractive Why should she be angry with him for that? Her business was to be more attractive than they

CONSTANCE You are not what they call a feminist, mother, are you?

MRS CULVER After all, what is fidelity?

CONSTANCE Mother, do you mind if I open the window?

MRS CULVER It is open

CONSTANCE In that case do you mind if I shut it? I feel that when a woman of your age asks such a question I should make some sort of symbolic gesture

MRS CULVER Don't be ridiculous Of course I believe in fidelity for women I suppose no one has ever questioned the desirability of that But men are different Women should remember that they have their homes and their name and position and their family, and they should learn to close their eyes when it's possible they may see something they are not meant to

[The BUTLER comes in]

BENTLEY Did you ring, Madam?

CONSTANCE Yes I am expecting Mr Bernard Kersal
I'm not at home to anybody else

BENTLEY Very good, madam

CONSTANCE Is Mr Middleton in?

BENTLEY Yes, madam He's in the consulting-room.

CONSTANCE Very well

[The BUTLER goes out]

MRS CULVER Is that a polite way of telling me that I had better take myself off?

CONSTANCE Of course not On the contrary I particularly want you to stay.

MRS CULVER Who is this mysterious gentleman?

CONSTANCE Mother Bernard

MRS CULVER That says nothing to me at all Not Saint Bernard, darling?

CONSTANCE Pull yourself together, my pet You must remember Bernard Kersal He proposed to me

MRS CULVER Oh, my dear, you cannot expect me to remember the names of all the young men who proposed to you

CONSTANCE Yes, but he proposed more than any of the others

MRS CULVER Why?

CONSTANCE I suppose because I refused him I can't think of any other reason

MRS CULVER He made no impression on me

CONSTANCE I don't suppose he tried to

MRS CULVER What did he look like?

CONSTANCE He was tall

MRS CULVER They were all tall

CONSTANCE He had brown hair and brown eyes

MRS CULVER They all had brown hair and brown eyes

CONSTANCE He danced divinely

MRS CULVER They all danced divinely

CONSTANCE I very nearly married him, you know

MRS CULVER Why didn't you?

CONSTANCE I think he was a trifle too much inclined to lie down on the floor and let me walk over him

MRS CULVER In short he had no sense of humour

CONSTANCE I was quite certain that he loved me, and I was never absolutely sure that John did

MRS CULVER Well, you're sure now, dear, aren't you?

CONSTANCE Oh, yes John adores me

MRS CULVER And what's this young man coming for to-day?

CONSTANCE He's not such a very young man any more. He was twenty-nine then and so he must be nearly forty-five now

MRS. CULVER He isn't still in love with you?

CONSTANCE I shouldn't think so. Do you think it possible after fifteen years? It's surely very unlikely. Don't look at me like that, mother. I don't like it.

MRS. CULVER Don't talk stuff and nonsense to me, child. Of course you know if he's in love with you or not.

CONSTANCE But I haven't seen him since I married John. You see he lives in Japan. He's a merchant or something in Kobe. He was here during the war on leave. But that was when I was so dreadfully ill and I didn't see him.

MRS. CULVER Oh! Why's he here now then? Have you been corresponding with him?

CONSTANCE No. One can't write letters to any one one never sees for fifteen years. He always sends me flowers on my birthday.

MRS. CULVER That's rather sweet of him.

CONSTANCE And the other day I had a letter from him saying he was in England and would like to see me. So I asked him to come to-day.

MRS. CULVER I wondered why you were so smart.

CONSTANCE Of course he may be terribly changed. Men go off so dreadfully, don't they? He may be bald and fat now.

MRS. CULVER He may be married.

CONSTANCE Oh, if he were I don't think he'd want to come and see me, would he?

MRS. CULVER: I see you're under the impression that he's still in love with you.

CONSTANCE Oh, I'm not.

MRS. CULVER. Then why are you so nervous?

CONSTANCE It's only natural that I shouldn't want him to think me old and haggard. He adored me, mother. I suppose he still thinks of me as I was then. It wouldn't be very nice if his face fell about a yard and a half when he came into the room.

MRS. CULVER I think I'd much better leave you to face the ordeal alone.

CONSTANCE On, no, mother, you must stay. I particularly want you. You see, he may be awful and I may wish I'd never seen him again. It'll be so much easier if you're here. I may not want to be alone with him at all.

MRS. CULVER Oh.

CONSTANCE [*With a twinkle in her eye*] On the other hand I may.

MRS. CULVER It seems to me you're putting me in a slightly embarrassing situation.

CONSTANCE Now listen. If I think he's awful we'll just talk about the weather and the crops for a few minutes and then we'll have an ominous pause and stare at him. That always makes a man feel a perfect fool and the moment a man feels a fool he gets up and goes.

MRS. CULVER Sometimes they don't know how to, poor dears, and the earth will never open and swallow them up.

CONSTANCE On the other hand if I think he looks rather nice I shall just take out my handkerchief and carelessly place it on the piano.

MRS. CULVER Why?

CONSTANCE Darling, in order that you may rise to your aged feet and say, well, you really must be running along.

MRS. CULVER Yes, I know that, but why should you carelessly place your handkerchief on the piano?

CONSTANCE Because I am a creature of impulse I shall have an impulse to place my handkerchief on the piano

MRS CULVER Oh, very well But I always mistrust impulses

[BENTLEY enters and announces BERNARD KERSAL. He is a tall good-looking man, sunburned and of healthy appearance. He is evidently very fit and he carries his forty-five years well]

BENTLEY Mr Kersal

CONSTANCE How do you do? Do you remember my mother?

BERNARD [*Shaking hands with her*] I'm sure she doesn't remember me

[CONSTANCE takes a small handkerchief out of her bag.]

MRS CULVER That is the soft answer that turneth away wrath

CONSTANCE It's rather late for tea, isn't it? Would you like a drink?

[*As she says this she goes towards the bell and places her handkerchief on the piano*]

BERNARD No, thanks I've just this moment had one.

CONSTANCE To brace you for seeing me?

BERNARD I was nervous

CONSTANCE Have I changed as much as you expected?

BERNARD Oh, that's not what I was nervous about

MRS CULVER Is it really fifteen years since you saw Constance?

BERNARD Yes I didn't see her when I was last in England. When I got demobbed I had to go out to Japan again and get my business together I haven't had a chance to come home before

[CONSTANCE has been giving her mother significant looks, but her mother does not notice them. CONSTANCE takes

a second handkerchief out of her bag and when the opportunity arises places it neatly on the piano beside the first one

MRS CULVER And are you home for long?

BERNARD A year

MRS CULVER Have you brought your wife with you?

BERNARD I'm not married

MRS CULVER Oh, Constance said you were married to a Japanese lady

CONSTANCE Nonsense, mother I never said anything of the sort

MRS CULVER Oh, perhaps I was thinking of Julia Linton
She married an Egyptian pasha I believe she's very happy At all events he hasn't killed her yet

BERNARD How is your husband?

CONSTANCE He's very well I dare say he'll be in presently

BERNARD Haven't you got a little sister? I suppose she's out now?

MRS CULVER He means Martha She's come out and gone in again

CONSTANCE She was not so very much younger than me, you know She's thirty-two now

[Mrs CULVER has taken no notice of the handkerchiefs and in desperation CONSTANCE takes a third from her bag and places it beside the other two]

MRS CULVER Do you like the East, Mr Kersal?

BERNARD One has a pretty good time there, you know

[Now Mrs CULVER catches sight of the three handkerchiefs and starts]

MRS CULVER I wonder what the time is

CONSTANCE It's late, mother Are you dining out to-night?
I suppose you want to have a lie-down before you dress for dinner

MRS CULVER I hope I shall see you again, Mr Kersal

BERNARD Thank you very much

[CONSTANCE *accompanies her to the door*

MRS CULVER Good-bye, darling [*In a whisper*] I couldn't remember if the handkerchiefs meant go or stay

CONSTANCE You had only to use your eyes You can see at a glance that he is the kind of man one would naturally want to have a heart-to-heart talk with after fifteen years

MRS CULVER You only confused me by putting more and more handkerchiefs on the piano

CONSTANCE For goodness' sake go, mother [*Aloud*] Good-bye, my sweet I'm sorry you've got to run away so soon

MRS CULVER Good-bye

[*She goes out and CONSTANCE comes back into the room*

CONSTANCE Did you think it very rude of us to whisper? Mother has a passion for secrets

BERNARD Of course not

CONSTANCE Now let's sit down and make ourselves comfortable Let me look at you You haven't changed much You're a little thinner and perhaps a little more lined Men are so lucky, if they have any character they grow better-looking as they grow older. Do you know I'm thirty-six now?

BERNARD What does that matter?

CONSTANCE Shall I tell you something? When you wrote and suggested coming here I was delighted at the thought of seeing you again and wrote at once making a date And then I was panic-stricken. I would have given almost anything not to have sent that letter And all to-day I've had such a horrible feeling at the pit of my stomach Didn't you see my knees wobble when you came into the room?

BERNARD In God's name, why?

CONSTANCE Oh, my dear, I think you must be a little stupid. I should be a perfect fool if I didn't know that when I was a girl I was very pretty. It's rather a pang when you are forced to the conclusion that you're not quite so pretty as you were. People don't tell one. One tries to hide it from oneself. Anyhow I thought I'd rather know the worst. That's one of the reasons I asked you to come.

BERNARD Whatever I thought you can hardly imagine that I should be deliberately rude.

CONSTANCE Of course not. But I watched your face. I was afraid I'd see there. By God, how she's gone off.

BERNARD And did you?

CONSTANCE You were rather shy when you came in. You weren't thinking of me.

BERNARD It's quite true, fifteen years ago you were a pretty girl. Now you're lovely. You're ten times more beautiful than you were then.

CONSTANCE. It's nice of you to say so.

BERNARD Don't you believe it?

CONSTANCE I think you do. And I confess that's sufficiently gratifying. Now tell me, why aren't you married? It's time you did, you know, or it'll be too late. You'll have a very lonely old age if you don't.

BERNARD I never wanted to marry anyone but you.

CONSTANCE Oh, come, you're not going to tell me that you've never been in love since you were in love with me?

BERNARD No, I've been in love half a dozen¹ times, but when it came to the point I found I still loved you best.

CONSTANCE I like you for saying that. I shouldn't have believed it if you'd said you'd never loved anybody else and I should have been vexed with you for thinking me such a fool as to believe it.

BERNARD You see, it was you I loved in the others One because she had hair like yours and another because her smile reminded me of your smile

CONSTANCE I hate to think that I've made you unhappy

BERNARD But you haven't. I've had a very good time, I've enjoyed my work, I've made a bit of money and I've had a lot of fun I don't blame you for having married John instead of me

CONSTANCE Do you remember John?

BERNARD Of course I do He was a very nice fellow I dare say he's made you a better husband than I should have I've had my ups and downs I'm very irritable sometimes John's been able to give you everything you wanted You were much safer with him By the way, I suppose I can still call you Constance

CONSTANCE Of course Why not? Do you know, I think you have a very nice nature, Bernard

BERNARD Are you happy with John?

CONSTANCE Oh, very I don't say that he has never given me a moment's uneasiness He did once, but I took hold of myself and saw that I mustn't be silly I'm very glad I did I think I can quite honestly say that ours has been a very happy and successful marriage

BERNARD I'm awfully glad to hear that Do you think it's cheek to ask if John loves you?

CONSTANCE I'm sure he loves me

BERNARD And do you love him?

CONSTANCE Very much

BERNARD May I make you a short speech?

CONSTANCE If I may interrupt at suitable moments

BERNARD I hope you're going to let me see a great deal of you during this year I've got at home

CONSTANCE I want to see a great deal of you

BERNARD There's just one thing I want to get off my chest and then I needn't refer to it again. I am just as madly in love with you as I was when I asked you to marry me fifteen years ago. I think I shall remain in love with you all my life. I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. But I want you to know that you needn't have the smallest fear that I shall make a nuisance of myself. I should think it an awfully caddish thing to try to come between you and John. I suppose we all want to be happy, but I don't believe the best way of being that is to try to upset other people's happiness.

CONSTANCE That's not such a very long speech after all. At a public dinner they would hardly even call it a few remarks.

BERNARD All I ask for is your friendship and if in return I care to give you my love I don't see that it's any one's business but my own.

CONSTANCE I don't think it is. I think I can be a very good friend, Bernard.

[The door opens and JOHN comes in]

JOHN Oh I'm sorry. I didn't know you were engaged.

CONSTANCE I'm not. Come in. This is Bernard Kersal.

JOHN How do you do?

BERNARD I'm afraid you don't remember me.

JOHN If you ask me point-blank I think it's safer to confess I don't.

CONSTANCE Don't be so silly, John. He used to come to mother's.

JOHN Before we were married, d'you mean?

CONSTANCE Yes. You spent several week-ends with us together.

JOHN My dear, that was fifteen years ago. I'm awfully sorry not to remember you, but I'm delighted to see you now.

CONSTANCE He's just come back from Japan

JOHN Oh, well, I hope we shall see you again I'm just going along to the club to have a rubber before dinner, darling [To BERNARD] Why don't you dine here with Constance? I've got an acute appendix and she'll be all alone, poor darling

BERNARD Oh, that's awfully kind of you

CONSTANCE It would be a friendly act Are you free?

BERNARD Always to do a friendly act

CONSTANCE Very well I shall expect you at eight-fifteen

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The Scene is the same

A Fortnight has passed

MARTHA *in walking costume and a hat is looking at an illustrated paper*

BENTLEY *comes in*

BENTLEY Mr Kersal is here, Miss

MARTHA Oh! Ask him if he won't come up

BENTLEY Very good, Miss [*He goes out and in a moment comes in again to announce BERNARD, and then goes*] Mr Kersal

MARTHA Constance is dressing She won't be very long

BERNARD Oh, I see Well, there's no violent hurry

MARTHA You're taking her to Ranelagh, aren't you?

BERNARD That was the idea I know some of the fellows who are playing to-day

MARTHA Are you having a good time in London?

BERNARD Marvellous When a man's lived in the East as long as I have, he's apt to feel rather out of it when he comes home But Constance and John have been ripping to me

MARTHA Do you like John?

BERNARD Yes He's been awfully kind

MARTHA Do you know, I remember you quite well

BERNARD Oh, you can't You were a kid when I used to come down and stay with your mother

MARTHA I was sixteen Do you imagine I wasn't thrilled to the marrow by Constance's young men?

BERNARD There were a good many of them I should have thought your marrow got callous

MARTHA But you were one of the serious ones I always thought you terribly romantic

BERNARD I was terribly romantic I think it's becoming in the young

MARTHA I don't think it's unbecoming in the not quite as young

BERNARD Don't think I'm romantic now I make a considerable income and I'm putting on weight The price of silk has ousted love's young dream in my manly bosom

MARTHA You're an unconscionable liar

BERNARD To which I can only retort that you're excessively rude

MARTHA You were madly in love with Constance in those days, weren't you?

BERNARD You know, it's so long ago I forget

MARTHA I advised her to marry you rather than John

BERNARD Why?

MARTHA Well, for one thing you lived in Japan I would have married any one who would take me there

BERNARD I live there still

MARTHA Oh, I don't want to marry you

BERNARD I couldn't help suspecting that

MARTHA I could never really quite understand what she saw in John

BERNARD I suppose she loved him

MARTHA I wonder if she ever regrets that she married John rather than you

BERNARD Well, don't She's perfectly satisfied with John and wouldn't change him for anything in the world

MARTHA It's exasperating, isn't it?

BERNARD I don't think so It must make it much more comfortable for a husband and wife to be content with one another

MARTHA You're in love with her still, aren't you?

BERNARD Not a bit

MARTHA Upon my soul, you've got a nerve Why, you donkey, you're giving it away all the time Do you know what you look like when she's in the room? Have you any idea how your eyes change when they rest on her? When you speak her name it sounds as though you were kissing it

BERNARD I thought you were an odious child when you were sixteen, Martha, and now that you're thirty-two I think you're a horrible woman

MARTHA I'm not really But I'm very fond of Constance and I'm inclined to be rather fond of you

BERNARD Don't you think you could show your attachment by minding your own business?

MARTHA Why does it make you angry because I've told you that no one can see you with Constance for five minutes without knowing that you adore her?

BERNARD My dear, I'm here for one year I want to be happy I don't want to give trouble or cause trouble I value my friendship with Constance and I hate the idea that anything should interfere with it

MARTHA Hasn't it occurred to you that she may want more than your friendship?

BERNARD No, it has not

MARTHA You need not jump down my throat.

BERNARD Constance is perfectly happy with her husband.

You must think me a damned swine if you think I'm going to butt in and try to smash up a perfectly wonderful union

MARTHA But, you poor fool, don't you know that John has been notoriously unfaithful to Constance for ages?

BERNARD I don't believe it

MARTHA Ask any one you like Mother knows it Barbara Fawcett knows it Every one knows it but Constance

BERNARD That certainly isn't true Mrs Durham told me when I met her at dinner two or three days ago that John and Constance were the most devoted couple she'd ever known

MARTHA Did Marie-Louise tell you that?

BERNARD She did

[MARTHA begins to laugh She can hardly restrain herself]

MARTHA The nerve Marie-Louise Oh, my poor Bernard Marie-Louise is John's mistress

BERNARD Marie-Louise is Constance's greatest friend

MARTHA Yes

BERNARD If this is a pack of lies I swear I'll damned well wring your neck.

MARTHA All right

BERNARD That was a silly thing to say I'm sorry

MARTHA Oh, I don't mind I like a man to be violent. I think you're just the sort of man Constance needs

BERNARD What the devil do you mean by that?

MARTHA It can't go on Constance is being made perfectly ridiculous Her position is monstrous I thought she ought to be told and as every one else seemed to shirk the job I was prepared to do it myself My mother was so disagreeable about it, I've had to promise not to say a word

BERNARD You're not under the delusion that I'm going to tell her?

MARTHA No, I don't really think it would come very well from you But things can't go on She's bound to find out All I want you to do is to well, stand by

BERNARD But Marie-Louise has got a husband What about him?

MARTHA His only ambition in life is to make a million He's the sort of a fool who thinks a woman loves him just because he loves her Marie-Louise can turn him round her little finger

BERNARD Has Constance never suspected?

MARTHA Never You've only got to look at her Really, her self-confidence sometimes is positively maddening

BERNARD I wonder if it wouldn't be better that she never did find out She's so happy She's entirely care-free You've only got to look at that open brow and those frank, trustful eyes

MARTHA I thought you loved her

BERNARD Enough to want her happiness above all things

MARTHA You *are* forty-five, aren't you? I forgot that for a moment

BERNARD Dear Martha You have such an attractive way of putting things

[CONSTANCE'S voice on the stairs is heard calling
BENTLEY, BENTLEY

MARTHA Oh, there's Constance I can't imagine where mother is I think I'll go into the brown room and write a letter

[BERNARD takes no notice of what she says nor does he make any movement when she goes out. A moments later CONSTANCE comes in

CONSTANCE Have I kept you waiting?

BERNARD It doesn't matter

CONSTANCE Hulloo! What's up?

BERNARD With me? Nothing Why?

CONSTANCE You look all funny Why are your eyes suddenly opaque?

BERNARD I didn't know they were

CONSTANCE Are you trying to hide something from me?

BERNARD Of course not

CONSTANCE Have you had bad news from Japan?

BERNARD No Far from it Silk is booming

CONSTANCE Then you're going to tell me that you've just got engaged to a village maiden

BERNARD No, I'm not

CONSTANCE I hate people who keep secrets from me

BERNARD I have no secrets from you

CONSTANCE Do you think I don't know your face by now?

BERNARD You'll make me vain I would never have ventured to think that you took the trouble to look twice at my ugly face

CONSTANCE [*With sudden suspicion*] Wasn't Martha here when you came? She hasn't gone, has she?

BERNARD She's waiting for her mother She's gone into another room to write letters

CONSTANCE Did you see her?

BERNARD [*Trying to be very casual*] Yes We had a little chat about the weather

CONSTANCE [*Immediately grasping what has happened*] Oh— Don't you think we ought to be starting?

BERNARD There's plenty of time It's no good getting there too early

CONSTANCE Then I'll take off my hat

BERNARD And it's jolly here, isn't it? I love your room

CONSTANCE Do you think it's a success? I did it myself
Barbara Fawcett wants me to go into the decorating
business She's in it, you know, and she's making quite
a lot of money

BERNARD [*Smiling to hide his anxiety in asking the question*]
Aren't you happy at home?

CONSTANCE [*Breezily*] I don't think it necessarily means
one's unhappy at home because one wants an occupation
One may very easily grow tired of going to parties all the
time But as a matter of fact I refused Barbara's offer

BERNARD [*Insisting*] You are happy, aren't you?

CONSTANCE Very

BERNARD You've made *me* very happy during this last
fortnight I feel as though I'd never been away You've
been awfully kind to me

CONSTANCE I'm very glad you think so I don't know that
I've done anything very much for you

BERNARD Yes, you have You've let me see you

CONSTANCE I let the policeman at the corner do that, you
know

BERNARD You mustn't think that because I take care only
to talk to you of quite casual things I don't still love you
with all my heart

CONSTANCE [*Quite coolly*] We agreed when first you came
back that your feelings were entirely your business

BERNARD Do you mind my loving you?

CONSTANCE Oughtn't we all to love one another?

BERNARD. Don't tease me

CONSTANCE My dear, I can't help being pleased and
flattered and rather touched It is rather wonderful that
any one should care for me .

BERNARD [*Interrupting*] So much?

CONSTANCE After so many years

BERNARD If any one had asked me fifteen years ago if I could love you more than I loved you then I should have said it was impossible I love you ten times more than I ever loved you before

CONSTANCE [*Going on with her own speech*] But I don't in the least want you to make love to me now

BERNARD I know I'm not going to I know you far too well

CONSTANCE [*Amused and a trifle taken aback*] I don't quite know what you've been doing for the last five minutes

BERNARD I was merely stating a few plain facts

CONSTANCE Oh, I beg your pardon I thought it was something quite different I'm afraid you might mistake my meaning if I said I'm quite curious to see how you *do* make love

BERNARD [*Good-humouredly*] I have a notion that you're laughing at me

CONSTANCE In the hope of teaching you to laugh at yourself

BERNARD I've been very good during the last fortnight, haven't I?

CONSTANCE Yes, I kept on saying to myself I wonder if a pat of butter really would melt in his mouth

BERNARD Well, for just a minute I'm going to let myself go

CONSTANCE I wouldn't if I were you

BERNARD Yes, but you're not I want to tell you just once that I worship the ground you tread on There's never been any one in the world for me but you

CONSTANCE Oh, nonsense There have been half a dozen
We are seven

BERNARD They were all you I love you with all my heart I admire you more than any woman I've ever met I respect you I'm an awful fool when it comes to the

point I don't know how to say all I've got in my heart without feeling like a perfect ass I love you I want you to know that if ever you're in trouble I should look upon it as the greatest possible happiness to be allowed to help you

CONSTANCE That's very kind of you I don't see why I should be in any trouble

BERNARD Always and in all circumstances you can count on me absolutely I will do anything in the world for you If ever you want me you have only to give me a sign I should be proud and happy to give my life for you

CONSTANCE It's sweet of you to say so

BERNARD Don't you believe it?

CONSTANCE [*With a charming smile*] Yes

BERNARD I should like to think that it meant—oh, not very much, but just a little to you

CONSTANCE [*Almost shaken*] It means a great deal I thank you

BERNARD Now we won't say anything more about it

CONSTANCE [*Recovering her accustomed coolness*] But why did you think it necessary to say all this just now?

BERNARD I wanted to get it off my chest

CONSTANCE Oh, really

BERNARD You're not angry with me?

CONSTANCE Oh, Bernard, I'm not that kind of a fool at all
It's a pity that Martha doesn't marry

BERNARD Don't think that I'm going to marry her.

CONSTANCE I don't I merely thought that a husband would be a pleasant and useful occupation for her She's quite a nice girl, you know A liar, of course, but otherwise all right

BERNARD Oh?

CONSTANCE Yes, a terrible liar, even for a woman
Shall we start now? It's no good getting there when the
polo is over

BERNARD All right Let's start

CONSTANCE I'll put my hat on again By the way, you
haven't had a taxi waiting all this time, have you?

BERNARD No, I've got a car I thought I'd like to drive
you down myself

CONSTANCE Open or shut?

BERNARD Open

CONSTANCE Oh, my dear, then I must get another hat A
broad brim like this is such a bore in an open car

BERNARD Oh, I am sorry

CONSTANCE It doesn't matter a bit I shall only be a minute
And why on earth shouldn't one be comfortable if one
can?

*[She goes out In a moment BENTLEY shows in MARIE-
LOUISE]*

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, how do you do *[To BENTLEY]* Will
you tell Mr Middleton at once?

BENTLEY Yes, madam

[Exit BENTLEY]

MARIE-LOUISE *[Rather flustered]* I particularly wanted to
see John for a minute and there are patients waiting to
see him, so I asked Bentley if he couldn't come here.

BERNARD I'll take myself off

MARIE-LOUISE I'm awfully sorry, but it's rather urgent.
John hates to be disturbed like this

BERNARD I'll go into the next room.

MARIE-LOUISE Are you waiting for Constance?

BERNARD Yes, I'm taking her to Ranelagh She's changing
her hat

MARIE-LOUISE I see Bentley told me she was upstairs
Good-bye I shall only be a minute [BERNARD *goes into
the adjoining room just as JOHN comes in*] Oh, John, I'm
sorry to drag you away from your patients

JOHN There's nothing urgent They can wait for a few
minutes [BERNARD *has closed the door behind him, and
JOHN's tone changes They speak now in a low voice and
quickly*] Is anything the matter?

MARIE-LOUISE Mortimer

JOHN What about Mortimer?

MARIE-LOUISE I'm convinced he suspects

JOHN Why?

MARIE-LOUISE He was so funny last night He came into
my room to say good-night to me He sat on my bed
He was chatting nicely and he was asking what I'd been
doing with myself all the evening .

JOHN Presumably you didn't tell him

MARIE-LOUISE No, I said I'd been dining here And
suddenly he got up and just said good-night and went
out His voice was so strange that I couldn't help looking
at him He was as red as a turkey cock

JOHN Is that all?

MARIE-LOUISE He never came in to say good-morning to
me before he went to the City

JOHN He may have been in a hurry.

MARIE-LOUISE He's never in too much of a hurry for that

JOHN I think you're making a mountain of a mole heap

MARIE-LOUISE Don't be stupid, John. Can't you see I'm as
nervous as a cat?

JOHN I can But I'm trying to persuade you there's
nothing to be nervous about

MARIE-LOUISE What fools men are They never will see

that it's the small things that matter I tell you I'm frightened out of my wits

JOHN You know there's a devil of a distance between suspicion and proof

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, I don't think he could prove anything
But he can make himself awfully unpleasant Supposing he put ideas in Constance's head?

JOHN She'd never believe him

MARIE-LOUISE If the worst came to worst I could manage Mortimer He's awfully in love with me That always gives one such an advantage over a man

JOHN Of course you can twist Mortimer round your little finger

MARIE-LOUISE I should die of shame if Constance knew
After all, she's my greatest friend and I'm absolutely devoted to her

JOHN Constance is a peach Of course I don't believe there's anything in this at all, but if there were, I'd be in favour of making a clean breast of it to Constance

MARIE-LOUISE Never!

JOHN I expect she'd kick up a row Any woman would.
But she'd do anything in the world to help us out

MARIE-LOUISE A lot you know about women She'd help you out, I dare say But she'd stamp on me with both feet That's only human nature

JOHN Not Constance's

MARIE-LOUISE Upon my word, it's lucky I'm fairly sure of you, John, or the way you talk of Constance would really make me jealous

JOHN Thank God you can smile You're getting your nerve back

MARIE-LOUISE It's been a comfort to talk it over It doesn't seem so bad now.

JOHN I'm sure you've got nothing to be frightened about

MARIE-LOUISE I dare say it was only my fancy It was a stupid risk to take all the same

JOHN Perhaps Why did you look so devilish pretty?

MARIE-LOUISE Oughtn't you to be getting back to your wretched patients?

JOHN I suppose so Will you stop and see Constance?

MARIE-LOUISE I may as well It would look rather odd if I went away without saying how d'you do to her

JOHN [*Going*] I'll leave you then And don't worry

MARIE-LOUISE I won't I dare say it was only a guilty conscience I'll go and have my hair washed

[*As JOHN is about to go, MARTHA comes in followed by BERNARD*]

MARTHA [*With an almost exaggerated cordiality*] I had no idea you were here, Marie-Louise

MARIE-LOUISE It's not very important

MARTHA I was just writing letters, waiting for mother, and Bernard's only just told me

MARIE-LOUISE I wanted to see John about something

MARTHA I hope you haven't got anything the matter with you, darling

MARIE-LOUISE No Mortimer's been looking rather run-down lately and I want John to persuade him to take a holiday

MARTHA Oh, I should have thought he'd be more likely to take a physician's advice than a surgeon's in a thing like that

MARIE-LOUISE He's got a tremendous belief in John, you know

MARTHA In which I'm sure he's justified John is so very reliable.

JOHN What can I do for you, Martha? If you'd like me to cut out an appendix or a few tonsils I shall be happy to oblige you

MARTHA My dear John, you've only left me the barest necessities of existence as it is I don't think I could manage with anything less than I have

JOHN My dear, as long as a woman has a leg to stand on she need not despair of exciting her surgeon's sympathy and interest

[CONSTANCE comes in with MRS CULVER

MARIE-LOUISE [*Kissing her*] Darling.

CONSTANCE How is your knee, still slipping?

MARIE-LOUISE It always gives me more or less trouble, you know

CONSTANCE Yes, of course I think you're very patient In your place I should be furious with John Of course I would never dream of consulting him if I had anything the matter with me

MRS CULVER I'm sorry I've been so long, Martha Have you been very impatient?

MARTHA No, I've been passing the time very pleasantly

MRS CULVER For others, darling, or only for yourself?

CONSTANCE I met mother on the stairs and she came up with me while I changed my hat Bernard is taking me down to Ranelagh

JOHN Oh, that'll be jolly

BERNARD We shall be dreadfully late

CONSTANCE Does it matter?

BERNARD No

[BENTLEY comes in with a card on a small saucer and takes it to CONSTANCE She looks at the card and hesitates

CONSTANCE How very odd

JOHN What's the matter, Constance?

CONSTANCE Nothing [*For an instant she reflects*] Is he downstairs?

BENTLEY Yes, madam

CONSTANCE I don't know why he should send up a card
Show him up

BENTLEY Very good, madam.

[*Exit BENTLEY*]

JOHN Who is it, Constance?

CONSTANCE Come and sit down, Marie-Louise

MARIE-LOUISE I must go and so must you

CONSTANCE There's plenty of time Do you like this hat?

MARIE-LOUISE Yes I think it's sweet

CONSTANCE What are *you* doing here, John? Haven't you got any patients to-day?

JOHN Yes, there are two or three waiting I'm just going down As a matter of fact I thought I deserved a cigarette [*He puts his hand to his hip pocket*] Hang, I've mislaid my cigarette-case You haven't seen it about, Constance?

CONSTANCE No, I haven't

JOHN I looked for it everywhere this morning I can't think where I left it I must ring up the nursing-home and ask if I left it there

CONSTANCE I hope you haven't lost it

JOHN Oh, no I'm sure I haven't I've just put it somewhere

[*The door opens and BENTLEY announces the visitor*]

BENTLEY Mr Mortimer Durham

MARIE-LOUISE [*Startled out of her wits*] Oh!

CONSTANCE [*Quickly, seizing her wrist*] Sit still, you fool

[*MORTIMER DURHAM comes in He is a stoutish biggish man of about forty, with a red face and an irascible manner At the moment he is a prey to violent emotion BENTLEY goes out*]

HULLOA, MORTIMER What are you doing in these parts at this hour? Why on earth did you send up a card?

[He stops and looks around]

MARIE-LOUISE What is the matter, Mortimer?

MORTIMER *[To CONSTANCE, with difficulty restraining his fury]* I thought you might like to know that your husband is my wife's lover

MARIE-LOUISE Morty!

CONSTANCE *[Keeping a firm hand on MARIE-LOUISE and very coolly to MORTIMER]* Oh? What makes you think that?

MORTIMER *[Taking a gold cigarette-case out of his pocket]* Do you recognize this? I found it under my wife's pillow last night

CONSTANCE Oh, I am relieved I couldn't make out where I'd left it *[Taking it from him]* Thank you so much

MORTIMER *[Angrily]* It's not yours

CONSTANCE Indeed it is I was sitting on Marie-Louise's bed and I must have slipped it under the pillow without thinking

MORTIMER It has John's initials on it

CONSTANCE I know It was presented to him by a grateful patient and I thought it much too nice for him, so I just took it

MORTIMER What sort of fool do you take me for, Constance?

CONSTANCE My dear Morty, why should I say it was my cigarette-case if it wasn't?

MORTIMER They had dinner together

CONSTANCE My poor Morty, I know that You were going to a City banquet or something, and Marie-Louise rang up and asked if she might come and take pot-luck with us

MORTIMER Do you mean to say she dined here?

CONSTANCE Isn't that what she told you?

MORTIMER Yes

CONSTANCE It's quite easy to prove. If you won't take my word for it we can ring for the butler, and you can ask him yourself. Ring the bell, John, will you?

MORTIMER [*Uneasily*] No, don't do that. If you give me your word, of course I must take it.

CONSTANCE That's very kind of you. I'm grateful to you for not exposing me to the humiliation of making my butler corroborate my statement.

MORTIMER If Marie-Louise was dining here why were you sitting on her bed?

CONSTANCE John had to go out and do an operation, and Marie-Louise wanted to show me the things she'd got from Paris, so I walked round to your house. It was a lovely night. You remember that, don't you?

MORTIMER Damn it, I've got more important things to do than look at the night.

CONSTANCE We tried them all on and then we were rather tired, so Marie-Louise got into bed and I sat down and we talked.

MORTIMER If you were tired why didn't you go home and go to bed?

CONSTANCE John had promised to come round and fetch me.

MORTIMER And did he? At what time did he come?

JOHN I couldn't manage it. The operation took much longer than I expected. It was one of those cases where when you once start cutting you really don't know where to stop. You know the sort of thing, don't you, Mortimer?

MORTIMER No, I don't. How the devil should I?

CONSTANCE All that is neither here nor there. This is a terrible accusation you've made against John and Marie-Louise and I'm very much upset. But I will remain

perfectly calm till I've heard everything Now let me have your proofs

MORTIMER My proofs? What d'you mean? The cigarette-case When I found the cigarette-case I naturally put two and two together

CONSTANCE [*With her eyes flashing*] I quite understand, but why did you make them five?

MORTIMER [*Emphatically, in order not to show that he is wavering*] It isn't possible that I should have made a mistake

CONSTANCE Even the richest of us may err I remember when Mr Pierpont Morgan died, he was found to own seven million dollars of worthless securities

MORTIMER [*Uneasily*] You don't know what a shock it was, Constance I had the most implicit confidence in Marie-Louise I was knocked endways I've been brooding over it ever since till I was afraid I should go mad

CONSTANCE And do you mean to say that you've come here and made a fearful scene just because you found my cigarette-case in Marie-Louise's room? I can't believe it You're a man of the world and a business man You're extremely intelligent Surely you have something to go upon You must be holding something back Don't be afraid of hurting my feelings You've said so much now that I must insist on your saying everything I want the truth and the whole truth

[*There is a pause MORTIMER looks from MARIE-LOUISE, who is quietly weeping, to CONSTANCE, with the utmost bewilderment*]

MORTIMER I'm afraid I've made a damned fool of myself

CONSTANCE I'm afraid you have

MORTIMER I'm awfully sorry, Constance I beg your pardon

CONSTANCE Oh, don't bother about me You've exposed me to the most bitter humiliation You've sown seeds of distrust between me and John which can never be

[*She looks for a word*

MRS CULVER [*Supplying it*] Fertilized

CONSTANCE [*Ignoring it*] Uprooted But I don't matter It's Marie-Louise's pardon you must beg

MORTIMER [*Humbly*] Marie-Louise

MARIE-LOUISE Don't touch me Don't come near me

MORTIMER [*To CONSTANCE, miserably*] You know what jealousy is

CONSTANCE Certainly not I think it's a most ugly and despicable vice

MORTIMER [*To MARIE-LOUISE*] Marie-Louise, I'm sorry Won't you forgive me?

MARIE-LOUISE You've insulted me before all my friends You know how devotedly I love Constance You might have accused me of having an affair with anyone else—but not John

CONSTANCE Not her greatest friend's husband The milkman or the dustman if you like, but not her greatest friend's husband

MORTIMER I've been a perfect swine I don't know what came over me I really wasn't responsible for my actions

MARIE-LOUISE I've loved you all these years No one has ever loved you as I've loved you Oh, it's cruel, cruel

MORTIMER Come away, darling I can't say here what I want to say

MARIE-LOUISE No, no, no

CONSTANCE [*Putting her hand on his arm, gently*] I think you'd better leave her here for a little while, Morty I'll talk to her when you've gone She's naturally upset A sensitive little thing like that

MORTIMER We're dining with the Vancouvers at 8 15

CONSTANCE For eighty-thirty I promise I'll send her home in good time to dress

MORTIMER She'll give me another chance?

CONSTANCE Yes, yes

MORTIMER I'd do anything in the world for her [CONSTANCE puts her fingers to her lips and then points significantly to the pearl chain she is wearing For a second MORTIMER does not understand, but as soon as her notion dawns on him he gives a pleased nod] You're the cleverest woman in the world [As he goes out he stops and holds out his hand to JOHN] Will you shake hands with me, old man? I made a mistake and I'm man enough to acknowledge it

JOHN [*Very cordially*] Not at all, old boy I quite agree that it did look fishy, the cigarette-case If I'd dreamt that Constance was going to leave an expensive thing like that lying about all over the place, I'm hanged if I'd have let her pinch it

MORTIMER You don't know what a weight it is off my mind I felt a hundred when I came here, and now I feel like a two-year-old

[*He goes out The moment the door is closed behind him there is a general change in every attitude The tension disappears and there is a feeling of relief*]

JOHN Constance, you're a brick I shall never forget this Never, so long as I live And by George, what presence of mind you showed I went hot and cold all over, and you never batted an eye-lash

CONSTANCE By the way, here is your cigarette-case You'd better have a ring made and hang it on your key-chain

JOHN No, no Keep it I'm too old to take these risks.

CONSTANCE By the way, did anyone see you go into Morty's house last night?

JOHN No, we let ourselves in with Marie-Louise's latch key

CONSTANCE That's all right then If Mortimer asks the servants they can tell him nothing I had to take that chance

MARIE-LOUISE [*With a little gesture of ashamed dismay*] Oh, Constance, what must you think of me?

CONSTANCE P Exactly the same as I thought before I think you're sweet, Marie-Louise

MARIE-LOUISE You have every right to be angry with me

CONSTANCE Perhaps, but not the inclination

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, it's not true I've treated you shamefully You've made me feel such a pig And you had your chance to get back on me and you didn't take it I'm so ashamed

CONSTANCE [*Amused*] Because you've been having an affair with John, or because you've been found out?

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, Constance, don't be heartless Say anything you like, curse me, stamp on me, but don't smile at me I'm in a terrible position

CONSTANCE And you want me to make a scene I know and I sympathize [*Very calmly*] But the fact is that Mortimer told me nothing I didn't know before

MARIE-LOUISE [*Aghast*] Do you mean to say that you've known all along?

CONSTANCE All along, darling I've been spending the last six months in a desperate effort to prevent my friends and relations from telling me your ghastly secret It's been very difficult sometimes Often mother's profound understanding of life, Martha's passion for truth at any price, and Barbara's silent sympathy, have almost worn me down But until to-day the t's were not definitely crossed nor the i's distinctly dotted, and I was able to ignore the

facts that were staring at me—rather rudely, I must say—in the face

MARIE-LOUISE But why, why? It's not human Why didn't you do anything?

CONSTANCE That, darling, is my affair

MARIE-LOUISE [*Thinking she understands*] Oh, I see

CONSTANCE [*Rather tartly*] No, you don't I have always been absolutely faithful to John I have not winked at your intrigue in order to cover my own

MARIE-LOUISE [*Beginning to be a little put out*] I almost think you've been laughing at me up your sleeve all the time

CONSTANCE [*Good-humouredly*] Oh, my dear, you mustn't be offended just because I've taken away from you the satisfaction of thinking that you have been deceiving me all these months I should hate you to think me capable of an intentional meanness

MARIE-LOUISE My head's going round and round

CONSTANCE Such a pretty head, too Why don't you go and lie down? You want to look your best if you're dining with the Vancouvers

MARIE-LOUISE I wonder where Mortimer is?

CONSTANCE You know that pearl necklace you showed me the other day and you said that Mortimer thought it cost a lot of money—well, he's gone to Cartier's to buy it for you

MARIE-LOUISE [*Excitedly*] Oh, Constance, do you think he has?

CONSTANCE I think all men are born with the knowledge that when they have wounded a woman's soul—and our souls are easily wounded—the only cure is a trifling, but expensive jewel

MARIE-LOUISE Do you think he'll have the sense to bring it home with him so that I can wear it to-night?

CONSTANCE Oh, my dear, don't be such a fool as to accept it with alacrity Remember that Mortimer has grievously insulted you, he's made the most shocking accusation that a man can make against his wife, he's trampled on your love and now he's destroyed your trust in him

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, how right you are, Constance

CONSTANCE Surely I need not tell you what to do Refuse to speak to him, but never let him get a word of defence in edgeways Cry enough to make him feel what a brute he is, but not enough to make your eyes swell Say you'll leave him and run sobbing to the door, but take care to let him stop you before you open it Repeat yourself Say the same thing over and over again—it wears them down—and if he answers you take no notice, but just say it again And at last when you've reduced him to desperation, when his head is aching as though it would split, when he's sweating at every pore, when he's harassed and miserable and haggard and broken—then consent as an unmerited favour, as a sign of your forgiving temper and the sweetness of your nature, to accept, no, don't consent, *deign* to accept the pearl necklace for which the wretch has just paid ten thousand pounds

MARIE-LOUISE [*With peculiar satisfaction*] Twelve, darling

CONSTANCE And don't thank him That wouldn't be playing the game Let him thank *you* for the favour you do him in allowing him to make you a paltry gift Have you got your car here?

MARIE-LOUISE No, I was in such a state when I came I took a taxi

CONSTANCE John, do take Marie-Louise down and put her in a taxi

JOHN All right

MARIE-LOUISE No, not John I couldn't After all, I have some delicacy

CONSTANCE Oh, have you? Well, let Bernard go

BERNARD I shall be pleased.

CONSTANCE [*To BERNARD*] But come back, won't you?

BERNARD Certainly.

MARIE-LOUISE [*Kissing CONSTANCE*] This has been a lesson to me, darling I'm not a fool, Constance I can learn

CONSTANCE At least prudence, I hope

[*MARIE-LOUISE goes out followed by BERNARD*
KERSAL

JOHN How did you guess that Marie-Louise had said she was dining here?

CONSTANCE She's too crafty a woman to invent a new lie when an old one will serve

JOHN It would have been awkward if Mortimer had insisted on asking Bentley if it was true

CONSTANCE I knew he wouldn't dare It's only if a man's a gentleman that he won't hesitate to do an ungentlemanly thing Mortimer is on the boundary line and it makes him careful

MARTHA [*Significantly*] Don't you imagine your patients are growing a trifle restless, John?

JOHN I like to keep them waiting They grow more and more nervous as the minutes pass and when I recommend an operation that will cost them two hundred and fifty pounds they are too shaken to protest

MARTHA [*Pursing her lips*] I can't imagine you'll very much like to hear what I'm determined to say to Constance

JOHN It's because I shrewdly suspect that you have some very unpleasant things to say about me that I am prepared reluctantly to neglect the call of duty and listen to you with my own ears.

CONSTANCE She's been exercising miracles of restraint for

the last three months, John I think she has a right to let herself go now

JOHN If she's suffering from suppressed desires she's come to the wrong establishment She ought to go to a psycho-analyst

MARTHA I've only got one thing to say, John, and I'm perfectly willing that you should hear it [*To CONSTANCE*] I don't know what your reasons were for shielding that abominable woman I can only suppose you wanted to avoid more scandal than was necessary

MRS CULVER [*Interrupting*] Before you go any further, my dear, you must let me put my word in [*To CONSTANCE*] My dear child, I beg you not to decide anything in a hurry We must all think things over First of all you must listen to what John has to say for himself

MARTHA What can he have to say for himself?

CONSTANCE [*Ironically*] What indeed?

JOHN Not the right thing anyway I've seen too much of married life

CONSTANCE [*Interrupting, with a smile*] Let us be just Other people's rather than your own

JOHN [*Going on*] To imagine that even the Archangel Gabriel could say the right thing

CONSTANCE I've no reason, however, to suppose that the Archangel Gabriel could ever find himself in such a predicament

JOHN I'm for it and I'm prepared to take what's coming to me

CONSTANCE [*To the world in general*] No man could say handsomer than that

JOHN I'm expecting you to make a scene, Constance It's your right and your privilege I'm willing to bear it Give me hell I deserve it Drag me up and down the

room by the hair of the head Kick me in the face
Stamp on me I'll grovel I'll eat the dust My name
is mud Mud

CONSTANCE My poor John, what is there to make a scene
about?

JOHN I know how badly I've treated you I had a wife
who was good, loving and faithful, devoted to my
interests, a perfect mother and an excellent housekeeper
A woman ten times too good for me If I'd had the
smallest spark of decency I couldn't have treated you
like this I haven't a word to say for myself

MARTHA [*Interrupting him*] You've humiliated her to all
her friends

JOHN I've behaved neither like a gentleman nor a
sportsman

MARTHA Your conduct is inexcusable

JOHN I haven't a leg to stand on

MARTHA Even if you didn't love her, you might have
treated her with respect

JOHN I've been as heartless as a crocodile and as un-
scrupulous as a typhoid bacillus

CONSTANCE Between you, of course, you're leaving me very
little to say

MARTHA There *is* nothing to say You're quite right This
is the sort of occasion when it's beneath a woman's
dignity to make a scene It just shows how little John
knows women to think that you could demean yourself
to vulgar abuse [*To JOHN*] I suppose you'll have the
decency to put no obstacle in the way of Constance's
getting her freedom

MRS CULVER Oh, Constance, you're not going to divorce
him?

MARTHA Mother, you're so weak How can she go on
living with a man for whom she has no respect? What

would her life be with this creature whom she can only mistrust and despise? Besides, you have to think of their child. How can Constance allow her daughter to be contaminated by the society of a person of this character?

CONSTANCE John has always been an excellent father. Let us give the devil his due.

MRS. CULVER Don't be too hard, darling. I can understand that at the moment you feel bitter, but it would be very sad if you let your bitterness warp your judgment.

CONSTANCE I don't feel in the least bitter. I wish I looked as sweet as I feel.

MRS. CULVER You can't deceive a mother, my dear. I know the angry resentment that you feel. Under the unfortunate circumstances it's only too natural.

CONSTANCE When I look into my heart I can't find a trace of resentment, except perhaps for John's being so stupid as to let himself be found out.

JOHN Let me say this in justification for myself, Constance. I did my little best to prevent it. Angels could do no more.

CONSTANCE And angels presumably have not the pernicious habit of smoking straight-cut cigarettes.

JOHN When you once get the taste for them, you prefer them to gippies.

MRS. CULVER Don't be cynical, darling. That is the worst way to ease an aching heart. Come to your mother's arms, my dear, and let us have a good cry together. And then you'll feel better.

CONSTANCE It's sweet of you, mother, but honestly I couldn't squeeze a tear out of my eyes if my life depended on it.

MRS. CULVER And don't be too hard. Of course John is to blame. I admit that. He's been very, very naughty. But

men are weak and women are so unscrupulous I'm sure he's sorry for all the pain he's caused you

MARTHA What puzzles me is that you didn't do something the moment you discovered that John was having an affair

CONSTANCE To tell you the truth, I thought it no business of mine

MARTHA [*Indignantly*] Aren't you his wife?

CONSTANCE John and I are very lucky people Our marriage has been ideal

MARTHA How can you say that?

CONSTANCE For five years we adored each other That's much longer than most people do Our honeymoon lasted five years and then we had a most extraordinary stroke of luck we ceased to be in love with one another simultaneously

JOHN I protest, Constance I've never ceased to be absolutely devoted to you

CONSTANCE I never said you had, darling I'm convinced of it I've never ceased to be devoted to you We've shared one another's interests, we've loved to be together, I've exulted in your success and you've trembled in my illness We've laughed at the same jokes and sighed over the same worries I don't know any couple that's been bound together by a more genuine affection But honestly, for the last ten years have you been in love with me?

JOHN You can't expect a man who's been married for fifteen years .

CONSTANCE My dear, I'm not asking for excuses I'm only asking for a plain answer.

JOHN In the long run I enjoy your society much more than anybody else's There's no one I like so much as you

You're the prettiest woman I've ever known and I shall say the same when you're a hundred

CONSTANCE But does your heart leap into your mouth when you hear my footstep on the stairs, and when I come into the room, is your first impulse to catch me in your manly arms? I haven't noticed it

JOHN I don't want to make a fool of myself

CONSTANCE Then I think you've answered my question
You're no more in love with me than I am with you

JOHN You never said a word of this before

CONSTANCE I think most married couples tell one another far too much. There are some things that two people may know very well, but which it's much more tactful for them to pretend they don't

JOHN How did you find out?

CONSTANCE I'll tell you. One night as we were dancing together, all at once I noticed that we weren't keeping such good step as we generally did. It was because my mind was wandering. I was thinking how it would suit me to do my hair like a woman who was dancing alongside of us. Then I looked at you and I saw you were thinking what pretty legs she'd got. I suddenly realized that you weren't in love with me any more and at the same moment I realized that it was a relief, because I wasn't in love with you.

JOHN I must say it never occurred to me for a moment

CONSTANCE I know. A man thinks it quite natural that he should fall out of love with a woman, but it never strikes him for a moment that a woman can do anything so unnatural as to fall out of love with him. Don't be upset at that, darling, that is one of the charming limitations of your sex.

MARTHA Do you mean mother and me to understand that since then John has been having one affair after another and you haven't turned a hair?

CONSTANCE Since this is the first time he's been found out, let us give him the benefit of the doubt and hope that till now he has never strayed from the strict and narrow path You're not angry with me, John?

JOHN No, darling, not angry But I *am* a little taken aback I think you've been making rather a damned fool of me It never struck me that your feelings for me had changed so much You can't expect me to like it

CONSTANCE Oh, come now, you must be reasonable You surely wouldn't wish me to have languished for all these years in a hopeless passion for you when you had nothing to give me in return but friendship and affection Think what a bore it is to have someone in love with you whom you're not in love with

JOHN I can't conceive of your ever being a bore, Constance

CONSTANCE [*Kissing her hand to him*] Don't you realize that we must thank our lucky stars? We are the favoured of the gods I shall never forget those five years of exquisite happiness you gave me when I loved you, and I shall never cease to be grateful to you, not because you loved me, but because you inspired me with love Our love never degenerated into weariness Because we ceased loving one another at the very same moment we never had to put up with quarrels and reproaches, recriminations and all the other paraphernalia of a passion that has ceased on one side and is still alive and eager on the other Our love was like a cross-word puzzle in which we both hit upon the last word at the same moment That is why our lives since have been so happy, that is why ours is a perfect marriage

MARTHA Do you mean to say that it meant nothing to you when you found out that John was carrying on with Marie-Louise?

CONSTANCE Human nature is very imperfect I'm afraid I must admit that at the first moment I was vexed But

only at the first moment Then I reflected that it was most unreasonable to be angry with John for giving to another something that I had no use for That would be too much like a dog in the manger And then I was fond enough of John to be willing that he should be happy in his own way And if he was going to indulge in an intrigue isn't that the proper phrase, John?

JOHN I have not yet made up my mind whether it really is an indulgence

CONSTANCE Then it was much better that the object of his affections should be so intimate a friend of mine that I could keep a maternal eye on him

JOHN Really, Constance

CONSTANCE Marie-Louise is very pretty so that my self-esteem was not offended, and so rich that it was certain John would have no reason to squander money on her to the inconvenience of myself She's not clever enough to acquire any ascendancy over him, and so long as I kept his heart I was quite willing that she should have his senses If you wanted to deceive me, John, I couldn't have chosen anyone with whom I would more willingly be deceived than Marie-Louise

JOHN I don't gather that you have been very grossly deceived, darling You have such penetration that when you look at me I feel as though I were shivering without a stitch of clothing on

MRS CULVER I don't approve of your attitude, Constance In my day when a young wife discovered that her husband had been deceiving her, she burst into a flood of tears and went to stay with her mother for three weeks, not returning to her husband till he had been brought to a proper state of abjection and repentance

MARTHA Are we to undersand, then, that you are not going to divorce John?

CONSTANCE You know, I can never see why a woman should give up a comfortable home, a considerable part of her income and the advantage of having a man about to do all the tiresome and disagreeable things for her, because he has been unfaithful to her. She's merely cutting off her nose to spite her face.

MARTHA I am at a loss for words. I cannot conceive how a woman of any spirit can sit down and allow her husband to make a perfect damned fool of her.

CONSTANCE You've been very stupid, my poor John. In the ordinary affairs of life stupidity is much more tiresome than wickedness. You can mend the vicious, but what in Heaven's name are you to do with the foolish?

JOHN I've been a fool, Constance. I know it, but I'm capable of learning by experience, so I can't be a damned fool.

CONSTANCE You mean that in the future you'll be more careful to cover your tracks?

MRS. CULVER Oh, no, Constance, he means that this has been a lesson to him, and that in the future you'll have no cause for complaint.

CONSTANCE I've always been given to understand that men only abandon their vices when advancing years have made them a burden rather than a pleasure. John, I'm happy to say, is still in the flower of his age. I suppose you give yourself another fifteen years, John, don't you?

JOHN Really, Constance, I don't know what you mean. The things you say sometimes are positively embarrassing.

CONSTANCE I think at all events we may take it that Marie-Louise will have more than one successor.

JOHN Constance, I give you my word of honour . . .

CONSTANCE [*Interrupting*] That is the only gift you can make for which I can find no use. You see, so long as I was able to pretend a blissful ignorance of your goings-on we could all be perfectly happy. You were enjoying yourself and I received a lot of sympathy as the outraged wife. But now I do see that the position is very difficult. You have put me in a position that is neither elegant nor dignified.

JOHN I'm awfully sorry, Constance.

MARTHA You're going to leave him?

CONSTANCE No, I'm not going to leave him. John, you remember that Barbara offered to take me into her business? I refused. Well, I've changed my mind and I'm going to accept.

JOHN But why? I don't see your point.

CONSTANCE I'm not prepared any more to be entirely dependent upon you, John.

JOHN But, my dear, everything I earn is at your disposal. It's a pleasure for me to provide for your wants. Heaven knows, they're not very great.

CONSTANCE I know. Come, John, I've been very reasonable, haven't I? Don't try and thwart me when I want to do something on which I've set my heart.

[*There is an instant's pause*]

JOHN I don't understand. But if you put it like that, I haven't a word to say. Of course, you must do exactly as you wish.

CONSTANCE That's a dear. Now go back to your patients or else I shall have to keep you as well as myself.

JOHN Will you give me a kiss?

CONSTANCE Why not?

JOHN [*Kissing her*] It's peace between us?

CONSTANCE Peace and good-will. [JOHN goes out] He is rather sweet, isn't he?

MRS CULVER What have you got on your mind, Constance?

CONSTANCE I, mother? [*Teasing her*] What do you suspect?

MRS CULVER I don't like the look of you

CONSTANCE I'm sorry for that Most people find me far from plain

MRS CULVER You've got some deviltry in mind, but for the life of me I can't guess it

MARTHA I can't see what you expect to get out of working with Barbara

CONSTANCE Between a thousand and fifteen hundred a year, I believe

MARTHA I wasn't thinking of the money, and you know it

CONSTANCE I'm tired of being the modern wife

MARTHA What do you mean by the modern wife?

CONSTANCE A prostitute who doesn't deliver the goods

MRS CULVER My dear, what would your father say if he heard you say such things?

CONSTANCE Darling, need we conjecture the remarks of a gentleman who's been dead for five and twenty years? Had he any gift for repartee?

MRS CULVER None whatever He was good, but he was stupid That is why the gods loved him and he died young

[BERNARD KERSAL *opens the door and looks in*

BERNARD May I come in?

CONSTANCE Oh, there you are I wondered what had become of you

BERNARD When Marie-Louise saw my car at the door she asked me to drive her I couldn't very well refuse

CONSTANCE So you took her home

BERNARD No, she said she was in such a state she must have her hair washed I drove her to a place in Bond Street

CONSTANCE And what did she say to you?

BERNARD She said, I don't know what you must think of me

CONSTANCE That is what most women say to a man when his opinion doesn't matter two straws to them And what did you answer?

BERNARD Well, I said, I prefer not to offer an opinion on a matter which is no business of mine

CONSTANCE Dear Bernard, one of the things I like most in you is that you always remain so perfectly in character If the heavens fell you would still remain the perfect English gentleman

BERNARD I thought it the most tactful thing to say

CONSTANCE Well, mother, I won't detain you any longer I know that you and Martha have a thousand things to do

MRS CULVER I'm glad you reminded me Come, Martha Good-bye, darling Good-bye, Mr Kersal

BERNARD Good-bye

CONSTANCE [*To MARTHA*] Good-bye, dear Thank you for all your sympathy You've been a great help in my hour of need

MARTHA I don't understand and it's no good saying I do

CONSTANCE Bless you [*MRS CULVER and MARTHA go out*
BERNARD *closes the door after them*] Shall we be very late?

BERNARD So late that it doesn't matter if we're a little later I have something important to say to you

CONSTANCE [*Teasing him a little*] Important to me or important to you?

BERNARD I can't tell you how distressed I was at that terrible scene

CONSTANCE Oh, didn't you think it had its lighter moments?

BERNARD It's only this afternoon I learned the truth, and then I never imagined for a moment that you knew it, too I can't tell you how brave I think it of you to have borne all this torture with a smiling face If I admired you before, I admire you ten times more now

CONSTANCE You're very sweet, Bernard

BERNARD My heart bleeds when I think of what you've gone through

CONSTANCE It's not a very good plan to take other people's misfortunes too much to heart

BERNARD Hardly an hour ago I told you that if ever you wanted me I was only too anxious to do anything in the world for you I little thought then that the time would come so soon There's no reason now why I shouldn't tell you of the love that consumes me Oh, Constance, come to me You know that if things were as I thought they were between you and John nothing would have induced me to say a word But now he has no longer any claims on you He doesn't love you Why should you go on wasting your life with a man who is capable of exposing you to all this humiliation? You know how long and tenderly I've loved you You can trust yourself to me I'll give my whole life to making you forget the anguish you've endured Will you marry me, Constance?

CONSTANCE My dear, John may have behaved very badly, but he's still my husband

BERNARD, Only in name You've done everything in your power to save a scandal and now if you ask him to let himself be divorced he's bound to consent

CONSTANCE Do you really think John has behaved so very badly to me?

BERNARD [*Astonished*] You don't mean to say that you have any doubts in your mind about his relationship with Marie-Louise?

CONSTANCE None

BERNARD Then what in God's name do you mean?

CONSTANCE My dear Bernard, have you ever considered what marriage is among well-to-do people? In the working classes a woman cooks her husband's dinner, washes for him and darns his socks. She looks after the children and makes their clothes. She gives good value for the money she costs. But what is a wife in our class? Her house is managed by servants, nurses look after her children, if she has resigned herself to having any, and as soon as they are old enough she packs them off to school. Let us face it, she is no more than the mistress of a man of whose desire she has taken advantage to insist on a legal ceremony that will prevent him from discarding her when his desire has ceased.

BERNARD She's also his companion and his helpmate.

CONSTANCE My dear, any sensible man would sooner play bridge at his club than with his wife, and he'd always rather play golf with a man than with a woman. A paid secretary is a far better helpmate than a loving spouse. When all is said and done, the modern wife is nothing but a parasite.

BERNARD I don't agree with you.

CONSTANCE You see, my poor friend, you are in love and your judgment is confused.

BERNARD I don't understand what you mean.

CONSTANCE John gives me board and lodging, money for my clothes and my amusements, a car to drive in and a certain position in the world. He's bound to do all that because fifteen years ago he was madly in love with me, and he undertook it, though, if you'd asked him, he would certainly have acknowledged that nothing is so

fleeting as that particular form of madness called love
It was either very generous of him or very imprudent
Don't you think it would be rather shabby of me to
take advantage now of his generosity or his want of
foresight?

BERNARD In what way?

CONSTANCE He paid a very high price for something that
he couldn't get cheaper. He no longer wants that. Why
should I resent it? I know as well as anybody else that
desire is fleeting. It comes and goes and no man can
understand why. The only thing that's certain is that
when it's gone it's gone forever. So long as John con-
tinues to provide for me what right have I to complain
that he is unfaithful to me? He bought a toy, and if he
no longer wants to play with it, why should he? He
paid for it.

BERNARD That might be all right if a man had only to think
about himself. What about the woman?

CONSTANCE I don't think you need waste too much sym-
pathy on her. Like ninety-nine girls out of a hundred,
when I married I looked upon it as the only easy,
honourable and lucrative calling open to me. When the
average woman who has been married for fifteen years
discovers her husband's infidelity it is not her heart that
is wounded but her vanity. If she had any sense, she
would regard it merely as one of the necessary incon-
veniences of an otherwise pleasant profession.

BERNARD Then the long and short of it is that you don't
love me.

CONSTANCE You think that my principles are all moon-
shine?

BERNARD I don't think they would have much influence if
you were as crazy about me as I am about you. Do
you still love John?

CONSTANCE I'm very fond of him, he makes me laugh, and we get on together like a house on fire, but I'm not in love with him

BERNARD And is that enough for you? Isn't the future sometimes a trifle desolate? Don't you want love?

[*A pause She gives him a long reflective look*]

CONSTANCE [*Charmingly*] If I did I should come to you for it, Bernard

BERNARD Constance, what do you mean? Is it possible that you could ever care for me? Oh, my darling, I worship the ground you tread on

[*He seizes her in his arms and kisses her passionately*]

CONSTANCE [*Releasing herself*] Oh, my dear, don't be so sudden I should despise myself entirely if I were unfaithful to John so long as I am entirely dependent on him

BERNARD But if you love me?

CONSTANCE I never said I did But even if I did, so long as John provides me with all the necessities of existence I wouldn't be unfaithful It all comes down to the economic situation He has bought my fidelity and I should be worse than a harlot if I took the price he paid and did not deliver the goods

BERNARD Do you mean to say there's no hope for me at all?

CONSTANCE The only hope before you at the moment is to start for Ranelagh before the game is over

BERNARD Do you still want to go?

CONSTANCE Yes

BERNARD Very well [*With a burst of passion*] I love you

CONSTANCE Then go down and start up the car, put a spot of oil in the radiator or something, and I'll join you in a minute I want to telephone.

BERNARD Very well

[*He goes out* CONSTANCE *takes up the telephone*

CONSTANCE Mayfair 2646 Barbara? It's Constance
That offer you made me a fortnight ago—is it still open?
Well, I want to accept it No, no, nothing has
happened John is very well He's always sweet, you
know It's only that I want to earn my own living
When can I start? The sooner the better

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

The scene is still the same A year has passed It is afternoon

CONSTANCE is seated at a desk writing letters The BUTLER shows in BARBARA FAWCETT and MARTHA

BENTLEY Mrs Fawcett and Miss Culver

CONSTANCE Oh! Sit down, I'm just finishing a note

BARBARA We met on the doorstep

MARTHA I thought I'd just look round and see if there was anything I could do to help you before you start

CONSTANCE That's very nice of you, Martha I really don't think there is I'm packed and ready, and for once I don't believe I've forgotten one of the things I shan't want

BARBARA I felt I must run in to say good-bye to you

CONSTANCE Now, my dear, you mustn't neglect your work the moment my back is turned

BARBARA Well, it's partly the work that's brought me An order has just come in for a new house and they want an Italian room

CONSTANCE I don't like that look in your beady eye, Barbara

BARBARA Well, it struck me that as you're going to Italy you might go round the shops and buy any nice pieces that you can find

CONSTANCE Perish the thought I've worked like a dog 'or a year and last night at six o'clock I downed tools I stripped off my grimy overalls, wrung the sweat from

my honest brow and scrubbed my horny hands You said I could take six weeks' holiday

BARBARA I admit that you've thoroughly earned it

CONSTANCE When I closed the shop-door behind me, I ceased to be a British working-man and resumed the position of a perfect English lady

MARTHA I never saw you in such spirits

CONSTANCE Something accomplished, something done But what I was coming to was this for the next six weeks I refuse to give a moment's thought to bath-rooms or wall-papers, kitchen sinks, scullery floors, curtains, cushions and refrigerators

BARBARA I wasn't asking you to I only wanted you to get some of that painted Italian furniture and a few mirrors

CONSTANCE No, I've worked hard and I've enjoyed my work, and now I'm going to enjoy a perfect holiday

BARBARA Oh, well, have it your own way

MARTHA Constance dear, I think there's something you ought to know

CONSTANCE I should have thought you had discovered by now that I generally know the things I ought to know

MARTHA You'll never guess whom I saw in Bond Street this morning

CONSTANCE Yes, I shall Marie-Louise

MARTHA Oh!

CONSTANCE I'm sorry to disappoint you, darling She rang me up an hour ago

MARTHA But I thought she wasn't coming back for another month She was going to stay away a year

CONSTANCE She arrived last night and I'm expecting her every minute.

MARTHA Here?

CONSTANCE Yes She said she simply must run in and see me before I left

MARTHA I wonder what she wants

CONSTANCE Perhaps to pass the time of day I think it's rather sweet of her, considering how busy she must be on getting back after so long

BARBARA She's been all over the place, hasn't she?

CONSTANCE Yes, she's been in Malaya, Mortimer has interests there, you know, and in China, and now they've just come from India

MARTHA I often wondered if it was at your suggestion that they set off on that long tour immediately after that unfortunate scene

CONSTANCE Which, you must confess, no one enjoyed more than you, darling

BARBARA It was certainly the most sensible thing they could do

MARTHA Of course you know your own business best, darling, but don't you think it's a little unfortunate that you should be going away for six weeks just as she comes back?

CONSTANCE We working-women have to take our holidays when we can

BARBARA Surely John has had his lesson He's not going to make a fool of himself a second time

MARTHA Do you think he has really got over his infatuation, Constance?

CONSTANCE I don't know at all But here he is, you'd better ask him

[As she says these words, JOHN enters]

JOHN Ask him what?

MARTHA *[Not at all at a loss]* I was just wondering what you'd do with yourself during Constance's absence.

JOHN I've got a lot of work, you know, and I shall go to the club a good deal

MARTHA It seems a pity that you weren't able to arrange things so that you and Constance should take your holidays together

BARBARA Don't blame me for that I was quite willing to make my arrangements to suit Constance

CONSTANCE You see, I wanted to go to Italy and the only places John likes on the Continent are those in which it's only by an effort of the imagination that you can tell you're not in England

MARTHA What about Helen?

CONSTANCE We've taken a house at Henley for August John can play golf and go on the river, and I shall be able to come up to town every day to look after the business

BARBARA Well, dear, I'll leave you I hope you'll have a wonderful holiday You've deserved it Do you know, I think I'm a very clever woman, John, to have persuaded Constance to work She's been absolutely invaluable to me

JOHN I never liked the idea and I'm not going to say I did

BARBARA Haven't you forgiven me yet?

JOHN She insisted on it and I had to make the best of a bad job

BARBARA Good-bye

CONSTANCE [*Kissing her*] Good-bye, dear Take care of yourself

MARTHA I'll come with you, Barbara Mother said she'd look in for a minute to say good-bye to you

CONSTANCE Oh, all right Good-bye

*[She kisses the two and accompanies them to the door.
They go out]*

JOHN I say, Constance, I thought you had to go now because Barbara couldn't possibly get away.

CONSTANCE Did I say that?

JOHN Certainly.

CONSTANCE Oh!

JOHN If I'd dreamt that you could just as easily take your holiday when I take mine

CONSTANCE [*Interrupting*] Don't you think it's a mistake for husbands and wives to take their holidays together? The only reason one takes a holiday is for rest and change and recreation Do you think a man really gets that when he goes away with his wife?

JOHN It depends on the wife

CONSTANCE I know nothing more depressing than the sight of all those couples in a hotel dining-room, one little couple to one little table, sitting opposite to one another without a word to say

JOHN Oh, nonsense You often see couples who are very jolly and cheerful

CONSTANCE Yes, I know, but look closely at the lady's wedding-ring and you'll see that it rests uneasily on the hand it adorns

JOHN We always get on like a house on fire and when I slipped a wedding-ring on your finger a bishop supervised the process You're not going to tell me that I bore *you*

CONSTANCE On the contrary, you tickle me to death It's that unhappy modesty of mine I was afraid that you could have too much of my society I thought it would refresh you if I left you to your own devices for a few weeks

JOHN If you go on pulling my leg so persistently I shall be permanently deformed

CONSTANCE Anyhow, it's too late now My bags are packed, my farewells made, and nothing bores people so much as to see you to-morrow when they've made up their minds to get on without you for a month

JOHN H'm Eyewash Look here, Constance, there's something I want to say to you

CONSTANCE Yes?

JOHN Do you know that Marie-Louise has come back?

CONSTANCE Yes She said she'd try and look in to say how do you do before I started It'll be nice to see her again after so long

JOHN I want you to do something for me, Constance

CONSTANCE What is it?

JOHN Well, you've been a perfect brick to me, and hang it all, I can't take advantage of your good nature I must do the square thing

CONSTANCE I'm afraid I don't quite understand

JOHN I haven't seen Marie-Louise since that day when Mortimer came here and made such a fool of himself She's been away for nearly a year and taking all things into consideration I think it would be a mistake to resume the relations that we were on then

CONSTANCE What makes you think she wishes to?

JOHN The fact that she rang you up the moment she arrived looks ominous to me

CONSTANCE Ominous? You know some women can't see a telephone without taking the receiver off and then, when the operator says, Number, please, they have to say something I dare say ours was the first that occurred to Marie-Louise

JOHN It's no good blinking the fact that Marie-Louise was madly in love with me.

CONSTANCE Well, we can neither of us blame her for that

JOHN I don't want to be unkind, but after all, circumstances have forced a break upon us and I think we had better look upon it as permanent

CONSTANCE Of course you must please yourself

JOHN I'm not thinking of myself, Constance I'm thinking partly of course of Marie-Louise's good, but, I confess, chiefly of you I could never look you in the face again if everything between Marie-Louise and me were not definitely finished

CONSTANCE I should hate you to lose so harmless and inexpensive a pleasure

JOHN Of course it'll be painful, but if one's made up one's mind to do a thing I think it's much better to do it quickly

CONSTANCE I think you're quite right I'll tell you what I'll do, as soon as Marie-Louise comes I'll make an excuse and leave you alone with her

JOHN That wasn't exactly my idea

CONSTANCE Oh?

JOHN It's the kind of thing that a woman can do so much better than a man It struck me that it would come better from you than from me

CONSTANCE Oh, did it?

JOHN It's a little awkward for me, but it would be quite easy for you to say—well, you know the sort of thing, that you have your self-respect to think of, and to cut a long story short, she must either give me up or you'll raise hell

CONSTANCE But you know what a soft heart I have If she bursts into tears and says she can't live without you I shall feel so sorry for her that I shall say, Well, damn it all, keep him.

JOHN You wouldn't do me a dirty trick like that, Constance.

CONSTANCE You know that your happiness is my chief interest in life

JOHN [*After a moment's hesitation*] Constance, I will be perfectly frank with you I'm fed up with Marie-Louise

CONSTANCE Darling, why didn't you say that at once?

JOHN Be a sport, Constance You know that's not the kind of thing one can say to a woman

CONSTANCE I admit it's not the kind of thing she's apt to take very well

JOHN Women are funny When they're tired of you they tell you so without a moment's hesitation and if you don't like it you can lump it But if you're tired of them you're a brute and a beast and boiling oil's too good for you

CONSTANCE Very well, leave it to me I'll do it

JOHN You're a perfect brick But you'll let her down gently, won't you? I wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world She's a nice little thing, Constance

CONSTANCE Sweet

JOHN And it's hard luck on her

CONSTANCE Rotten

JOHN Make her understand that I'm more sinned against than sinning I don't want her to think too badly of me

CONSTANCE Of course not

JOHN But be quite sure it's definite

CONSTANCE Leave it to me

JOHN You're a ripper, Constance By George, no man could want a better wife

[*The BUTLER introduces MARIE-LOUISE*

BUTLER Mrs Durham.

[*The two women embrace warmly*

MARIE-LOUISE Darling, how perfectly divine to see you again It's too, too wonderful

CONSTANCE My dear, how well you're looking Are those the new pearls?

MARIE-LOUISE Aren't they sweet? But Mortimer bought me the most heavenly emeralds when we were in India Oh, John, how are you?

JOHN Oh, I'm all right, thanks

MARIE-LOUISE Aren't you a little fatter than when I saw you last?

JOHN Certainly not

MARIE-LOUISE I've lost pounds [To CONSTANCE] I'm so glad I caught you I should have been so disappointed to miss you [To JOHN] Where are you going?

JOHN Nowhere Constance is going alone

MARIE-LOUISE Is she? How perfectly divine I suppose you can't get away Are you making pots of money?

JOHN I get along Will you forgive me if I leave you? I've got to be off

MARIE-LOUISE Of course You're always busy, aren't you?

JOHN Good-bye

MARIE-LOUISE I hope we shall see something of you while Constance is away

JOHN Thank you very much

MARIE-LOUISE Mortimer's golf has improved He'd love to play with you

JOHN Oh, yes, I should love it

[He goes out]

MARIE-LOUISE. I did so hope to find you alone Constance, I've got heaps and heaps to tell you Isn't it tactful of John to leave us? First of all I want to tell you how splendidly everything has turned out. You know you were quite right. I'm so glad I took your advice and made Mortimer take me away for a year

CONSTANCE Mortimer is no fool.

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, no, for a man he's really quite clever I gave him hell, you know, for ever having suspected me, and at last he was just eating out of my hand But I could see he wasn't quite sure of me You know what men are—when they once get an idea in their heads it's dreadfully difficult for them to get it out again But the journey was an inspiration, I was absolutely angelic all the time, and he made a lot of money, so everything in the garden was rosy

CONSTANCE I'm very glad

MARIE-LOUISE I owe it all to you, Constance I made Mortimer buy you a perfectly divine star sapphire in Ceylon I told him he owed you some sort of reparation for the insult he'd put upon you It cost a hundred and twenty pounds, darling, and we're taking it to Cartier's to have it set

CONSTANCE How thrilling

MARIE-LOUISE You mustn't think I'm ungrateful Now listen, Constance, I want to tell you at once that you needn't distress yourself about me and John

CONSTANCE I never did

MARIE-LOUISE I know I behaved like a little beast, but I never thought you'd find out If I had, well, you know me well enough to be positive that nothing would have induced me to have anything to do with him.

CONSTANCE You're very kind

MARIE-LOUISE I want you to do something for me, Constance Will you?

CONSTANCE I'm always eager to oblige a friend

MARIE-LOUISE Well, you know what John is Of course he's a dear and all that kind of thing, but the thing's over and it's best that he should realize it at once

CONSTANCE Over?

MARIE-LOUISE Of course I know he's head over heels in love with me still I saw that the moment I came into the room One can't blame him for that, can one?

CONSTANCE Men do find you fascinating

MARIE-LOUISE But one has to think of oneself sometimes in this world He must see that it could never be the same after we discovered that you knew all about it

CONSTANCE I kept it from you as long as I could

MARIE-LOUISE One couldn't help feeling then that you were rather making fools of us It seemed to take the romance away, if you see what I mean

CONSTANCE Dimly

MARIE-LOUISE You know, I wouldn't hurt John's feelings for the world, but it's no good beating about the bush and I'm quite determined to have the thing finished and done with before you go

CONSTANCE This is very sudden I'm afraid it'll be an awful shock to John

MARIE-LOUISE I've quite made up my mind

CONSTANCE There isn't much time for a very long and moving scene, but I'll see if John is in still Could you manage it in ten minutes?

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, but I can't see him I want you to tell him.

CONSTANCE Me!

MARIE-LOUISE You know him so well, you know just the sort of things to say to him It's not very nice telling a man who adores you that you don't care for him in that way any more It's so much easier for a third party

CONSTANCE Do you really think so?

MARIE-LOUISE I'm positive of it You see, you can say that for your sake I've made up my mind that from now on we can be nothing but friends You've been so wonder-

ful to both of us, it would be dreadful if we didn't play the game now. Say that I shall always think of him tenderly and that he's the only man I've ever really loved, but that we must part.

CONSTANCE But if he insists on seeing you?

MARIE-LOUISE It's no good, Constance, I can't see him. I shall only cry and get my eyes all bunged up. You will do it for me, darling. Please.

CONSTANCE I will.

MARIE-LOUISE I got the most divine evening frock in pale green satin on my way through Paris, and it would look too sweet on you. Would you like me to give it to you? I've only worn it once.

CONSTANCE Now tell me the real reason why you're so determined to get rid of John without a moment's delay.

[MARIE-LOUISE looks at her and gives a little roguish smile]

MARIE-LOUISE Swear you won't tell.

CONSTANCE On my honour.

MARIE-LOUISE Well, my dear, we met a perfectly divine young man in India. He was A D C to one of the governors and he came home on the same boat with us. He simply adores me.

CONSTANCE And of course you adore him.

MARIE-LOUISE My dear, I'm absolutely mad about him. I don't know what's going to happen.

CONSTANCE I think we can both give a pretty shrewd guess.

MARIE-LOUISE It's simply awful to have a temperament like mine. Of course you can't understand, you're cold.

CONSTANCE [*Very calmly*] You're an immoral little beast, Marie-Louise.

MARIE-LOUISE Oh, I'm not. I have affairs—but I'm not promiscuous.

CONSTANCE I should respect you more if you were an honest prostitute She at least does what she does to earn her bread and butter You take everything from your husband and give him nothing that he pays for You are no better than a vulgar cheat

MARIE-LOUISE [*Surprised and really hurt*] Constance, how can you say such things to me? I think it's terribly unkind of you I thought you liked me

CONSTANCE I do I think you a liar, a humbug and a parasite, but I like you

MARIE-LOUISE You can't if you think such dreadful things about me

CONSTANCE I do You're good-tempered and generous and sometimes amusing I even have a certain affection for you

MARIE-LOUISE [*Smiling*] I don't believe you mean a word you say You know how devoted I am to you

CONSTANCE I take people as they are and I dare say that in another twenty years you'll be the pink of propriety

MARIE-LOUISE Darling, I knew you didn't mean it, but you will have your little joke

CONSTANCE Now run along, darling, and I'll break the news to John

MARIE-LOUISE Well, good-bye, and be gentle with him There is no reason why we shouldn't spare him as much as possible [*She turns to go and at the door—stops*] Of course I've often wondered why with your looks you don't have more success than you do. I know now

CONSTANCE Tell me

MARIE-LOUISE You see—you're a humourist and that always puts men off [*She goes out In a moment the door is cautiously opened and JOHN puts his head in*]

JOHN Has she gone?

CONSTANCE Come in. A fine night and all's well.

JOHN [*Entering*] I heard the door bang You broke it to her? *r*

CONSTANCE I broke it

JOHN Was she awfully upset?

CONSTANCE Of course it was a shock, but she kept a stiff upper lip

JOHN Did she cry?

CONSTANCE No Not exactly To tell you the truth I think she was stunned by the blow But of course when she gets home and realises the full extent of her loss, she'll cry like anything

JOHN I hate to see a woman cry

CONSTANCE It is painful, isn't it? But of course it's a relief to the nerves

JOHN I think you're rather cool about it, Constance I am not feeling any too comfortable I shouldn't like her to think I'd treated her badly

CONSTANCE I think she quite understands that you're doing it for my sake She knows that you have still a very great regard for her

JOHN But you made it quite definite, didn't you?

CONSTANCE Oh, quite

JOHN I'm really very much obliged to you, Constance

CONSTANCE Not at all

JOHN At all events I'm glad to think that you'll be able to set out on your holiday with a perfectly easy mind By the way, do you want any money? I'll write you a cheque at once

CONSTANCE Oh, no, thank you I've got plenty I've earned fourteen hundred pounds during this year that I've been working

JOHN Have you, by Jove! That's a very considerable sum.

CONSTANCE I'm taking two hundred of it for my holiday I've spent two hundred on my clothes and on odds and ends and the remaining thousand I've paid into your account this morning for my board and lodging during the last twelve months

JOHN Nonsense, darling I won't hear of such a thing I don't want you to pay for your board and lodging

CONSTANCE I insist

JOHN Don't you love me any more?

CONSTANCE What has that to do with it? Oh, you think a woman can only love a man if he keeps her Isn't that rating your powers of fascination too modestly? What about your charm and good humour?

JOHN Don't be absurd, Constance I can perfectly well afford to support you in your proper station To offer me a thousand pounds for your board and lodging is almost insulting

CONSTANCE Don't you think it's the kind of insult you could bring yourself to swallow? One can do a lot of amusing things with a thousand pounds

JOHN I wouldn't dream of taking it I never liked the idea of your going into business I thought you had quite enough to do looking after the house and so forth

CONSTANCE Have you been less comfortable since I began working?

JOHN No, I can't say I have

CONSTANCE You can take my word for it, a lot of incompetent women talk a great deal of nonsense about housekeeping If you know your job and have good servants it can be done in ten minutes a day

JOHN Anyhow, you wanted to work and I yielded I thought in point of fact it would be a very pleasant occupation for you, but heaven knows I wasn't expecting to profit financially by it

CONSTANCE No, I'm sure you weren't

JOHN Constance, I could never help thinking that your determination had something to do with Marie-Louise

[There is a moment's pause and when CONSTANCE speaks it is not without seriousness]

CONSTANCE Haven't you wondered why I never reproached you for your affair with Marie-Louise?

JOHN Yes I could only ascribe it to your unfathomable goodness

CONSTANCE You were wrong I felt I hadn't the right to reproach you

JOHN What do you mean, Constance? You had every right We behaved like a couple of swine I may be a dirty dog, but, thank God, I know I'm a dirty dog

CONSTANCE You no longer desired me How could I blame you for that? But if you didn't desire me, what use was I to you? You've seen how small a share I take in providing you with the comfort of a well-ordered home

JOHN You were the mother of my child

CONSTANCE Let us not exaggerate the importance of that, John I performed a natural and healthy function of my sex And all the tiresome part of looking after the child when she was born I placed in the hands of much more competent persons Let us face it, I was only a parasite in your house You had entered into legal obligations that prevented you from turning me adrift, but I owe you a debt of gratitude for never letting me see by word or gesture that I was no more than a costly and at times inconvenient ornament

JOHN I never looked upon you as an inconvenient ornament And I don't know what you mean by being a parasite Have I ever in any way suggested that I grudged a penny that I spent on you?

CONSTANCE [*With mock amazement*] Do you mean to say that I ascribed to your beautiful manners what was only due to your stupidity? Are you as great a fool as the average man who falls for the average woman's stupendous bluff that just because he's married her he must provide for her wants and her luxuries, sacrifice his pleasures and comfort and convenience, and that he must look upon it as a privilege that she allows him to be her slave and bondman? Come, come, John, pull yourself together. You're a hundred years behind the times. Now that women have broken down the walls of the harem they must take the rough-and-tumble of the street.

JOHN You forget all sorts of things. Don't you think a man may have gratitude to a woman for the love he has had for her in the past?

CONSTANCE I think gratitude is often very strong in men so long as it demands from them no particular sacrifices.

JOHN Well, it's a curious way of looking at things, but obviously I have reason to be thankful for it. But after all you knew what was going on long before it came out. What happened then that made you make up your mind to go into business?

CONSTANCE I am naturally a lazy woman. So long as appearances were saved I was prepared to take all I could get and give nothing in return. I was a parasite, but I knew it. But when we reached a situation where only your politeness or your lack of intelligence prevented you from throwing the fact in my teeth, I changed my mind. I thought that I should very much like to be in a position where, if I felt inclined to, I could tell you, with calm and courtesy, but with determination—to go to hell.

JOHN And are you in that position now?

CONSTANCE Precisely I owe you nothing I am able to keep myself For the last year I have paid my way There is only one freedom that is really important and that is economic freedom, for in the long run the man who pays the piper calls the tune Well, I have that freedom, and upon my soul it's the most enjoyable sensation I can remember since I ate my first strawberry ice

JOHN You know, I would sooner you had made me scenes for a month on end like any ordinary woman and nagged my life out than that you should harbour this cold rancour against me

CONSTANCE My poor darling, what are you talking about? Have you known me for fifteen years and do you think me capable of the commonness of insincerity? I harbour no rancour Why, my dear, I'm devoted to you

JOHN Do you mean to tell me that you've done all this without any intention of making me feel a perfect cad?

CONSTANCE On my honour If I look in my heart I can only find in it affection for you and the most kindly and charitable feelings Don't you believe me?

[He looks at her for a moment and then makes a little gesture of bewilderment]

JOHN Yes, oddly enough, I do You are a remarkable woman, Constance

CONSTANCE I know, but keep it to yourself You don't want to give a dog a bad name

JOHN *[With an affectionate smile]* I wish I could get away I don't half like the idea of your travelling by yourself

CONSTANCE Oh, but I'm not Didn't I tell you?

JOHN No

CONSTANCE I meant to I'm going with Bernard.

JOHN Oh! You never said so. Who else?

CONSTANCE Nobody

JOHN Oh! [*He is rather taken aback at the news*] Isn't that rather odd?

CONSTANCE No Why?

JOHN [*Not knowing at all how to take it*] Well, it's not usual for a young woman to take a six weeks' holiday with a man who can hardly be described as old enough to be her father

CONSTANCE Bernard's just about the same age as you

JOHN Don't you think it'll make people gossip a bit?

CONSTANCE I haven't gone out of my way to spread the news In fact, now I come to think of it, I haven't told anyone but you, and you, I am sure, will be discreet

[*JOHN suddenly feels that his collar is a little too tight for him, and with his fingers he tries to loosen it*]

JOHN You're pretty certain to be seen by someone who knows you and they're bound to talk

CONSTANCE Oh, I don't think so You see we're motoring all the way and we neither of us care for frequented places One of the advantages of having really nice friends like ours is that you can always be certain of finding them at the fashionable resorts at the very moment when everybody you know is there

JOHN Of course I am not so silly as to think that because a man and a woman go away together it is necessary to believe the worst about them, but you can't deny that it is rather unconventional I wouldn't for a moment suggest that there'll be anything between you, but it's inevitable that ordinary persons should think there was

CONSTANCE [*As cool as a cucumber*] I've always thought that ordinary persons had more sense than the clever ones are ready to credit them with

JOHN [*Deliberately*] What on earth do you mean?

CONSTANCE Why, of course we're going as man and wife, John.

JOHN Don't be a fool, Constance You don't know what you're talking about That's not funny at all

CONSTANCE But, my poor John, whom do you take us for? Am I so unattractive that what I'm telling you is incredible? Why else should I go with Bernard? If I merely wanted a companion I'd go with a woman We could have headaches together and have our hair washed at the same place and copy one another's nightdresses A woman's a much better travelling companion than a man

JOHN I may be very stupid, but I don't seem to be able to understand what you're saying Do you really mean me to believe that Bernard Kersal is your lover?

CONSTANCE Certainly not

JOHN Then what *are* you talking about?

CONSTANCE My dear, I can't put it any plainer I'm going away for six weeks' holiday and Bernard has very kindly offered to come with me

JOHN And where do I come in?

CONSTANCE You don't come in You stay at home and look after your patients

JOHN. [*Trying his best to control himself*] I flatter myself I'm a sensible man I'm not going to fly into a passion Many men would stamp and rave or break the furniture I have no intention of being melodramatic, but you must allow me to say that what you've just told me is very surprising

CONSTANCE Just for a moment, perhaps, but I'm sure you have only to familiarize yourself with the notion in order to become reconciled to it

JOHN I'm doubtful whether I shall have time to do that, for I feel uncommonly as though I were about to have an apoplectic stroke.

CONSTANCE Undo your collar then Now I come to look at you I confess that you are more than usually red in the face

JOHN What makes you think that I am going to allow you to go?

CONSTANCE [*Good-humouredly*] Chiefly the fact that you can't prevent me

JOHN I can't bring myself to believe that you mean what you say I don't know what ever put such an idea into your head

CONSTANCE [*Casually*] I thought a change might do me good

JOHN Nonsense

CONSTANCE Why? You did Don't you remember? You were getting rather flat and stale Then you had an affair with Marie-Louise and you were quite another man Gay and amusing, full of life, and much more agreeable to live with The moral effect on you was quite remarkable

JOHN It's different for a man than for a woman

CONSTANCE Are you thinking of the possible consequences? We have long passed the Victorian Era when asterisks were followed after a certain interval by a baby

JOHN That never occurred to me What I meant was that if a man's unfaithful to his wife she's an object of sympathy, whereas if a woman's unfaithful to her husband he's merely an object of ridicule

CONSTANCE That is one of those conventional prejudices that sensible people must strive to ignore

JOHN Do you expect me to sit still and let this man take my wife away from under my very nose? I wonder you don't ask me to shake hands with him and wish him good luck.

CONSTANCE That's just what I am going to do He's coming here in a few minutes to say good-bye to you

JOHN I shall knock him down

CONSTANCE I wouldn't take any risks in your place He's pretty hefty and I'm under the impression that he's very nippy with his left

JOHN I shall have great pleasure in telling him exactly what I think of him

CONSTANCE Why? Have you forgotten that I was charming to Marie-Louise? We were the best of friends She never bought a hat without asking me to go and help her choose it

JOHN I have red blood in my veins

CONSTANCE I'm more concerned at the moment with the grey matter in your brain

JOHN Is he in love with you?

CONSTANCE Madly Didn't you know?


JOHN I? How should I?

CONSTANCE He's been here a great deal during the last year Were you under the impression that he only came to see you?

JOHN I never paid any attention to him I thought him rather dull

CONSTANCE He is rather dull But he's very sweet

JOHN What sort of a man is it who eats a fellow's food and drinks his wine and then makes love to his wife behind his back?

CONSTANCE A man very like you, John, I should say. 

JOHN Not at all Mortimer is the sort of man who was born to be made a fool of

CONSTANCE None of us know for certain the designs of Providence.

JOHN I see you're bent on driving me to desperation I shall break something in a minute

CONSTANCE There's that blue-and-white bowl that your Uncle Henry gave us as a wedding present Break that, it's only a modern imitation

[He takes the bowl and hurls it on the floor so that it is shattered]

JOHN There

CONSTANCE Do you feel better?

JOHN Not a bit

CONSTANCE It's a pity you broke it then You might have given it away as a wedding present to one of your colleagues at the hospital

[The butler shows in MRS CULVER]

BUTLER Mrs Culver

CONSTANCE Oh, mother, how sweet of you to come I was so hoping I'd see you before I left

MRS CULVER Oh, you've had an accident

CONSTANCE No, John's in a temper and he thought it would relieve him if he broke something

MRS CULVER Nonsense, John's never in a temper

JOHN That's what you think, Mrs Culver Yes, I am in a temper I'm in a filthy temper Are you a party to this plan of Constance's?

CONSTANCE No, mother doesn't know

JOHN Can't you do something to stop it? You have some influence over her You must see that the thing's preposterous.

MRS CULVER My dear boy, I haven't the ghost of an idea what you're talking about

JOHN She's going to Italy with Bernard Kersal Alone.

MRS CULVER *[With a stare]* It's not true, how d'you know?

JOHN She's just told me so, as bold as brass, out of a blue sky She mentioned it in the course of conversation as if she were saying, Darling, your coat wants brushing

MRS CULVER Is it true, Constance?

CONSTANCE Quite

MRS CULVER But haven't you been getting on with John?
I always thought you two were as happy as the day is long

JOHN So did I We've never had the shadow of a quarrel
We've always got on

MRS CULVER Don't you love John any more, darling?

CONSTANCE Yes, I'm devoted to him

JOHN How can you be devoted to a man when you're going to do him the greatest injury that a woman can do to a man?

CONSTANCE Don't be idiotic, John I'm going to do you no more injury than you did me a year ago

JOHN [*Striding up to her, thinking quite erroneously that he sees light*] Are you doing this in order to pay me out for Marie-Louise?

CONSTANCE Don't be such a fool, John Nothing is further from my thoughts

MRS CULVER The circumstances are entirely different It was very naughty of John to deceive you, but he's sorry for what he did and he's been punished for it It was all very dreadful and caused us a great deal of pain But a man's a man and you expect that kind of thing from him There are excuses for him There are none for a woman Men are naturally polygamous and sensible women have always made allowances for their occasional lapse from a condition which modern civilisation has forced on them. Women are monogamous They do not naturally desire more than one man and that is why the common sense of the world has heaped obloquy upon

them when they have overstepped the natural limitations of their sex

CONSTANCE [*Smiling*] It seems rather hard that what is sauce for the gander shouldn't also be sauce for the goose

MRS CULVER We all know that unchastity has no moral effect on men. They can be perfectly promiscuous and remain upright, industrious and reliable. It's quite different with women. It ruins their character. They become untruthful and dissipated, lazy, shiftless and dishonest. That is why the experience of ten thousand years has demanded chastity in women. Because it has learnt that this virtue is the key to all others.

CONSTANCE They were dishonest because they were giving away something that wasn't theirs to give. They had sold themselves for board, lodging and protection. They were chattel. They were dependent on their husbands and when they were unfaithful to them they were liars and thieves. I'm not dependent on John. I am economically independent and therefore I claim my sexual independence. I have this afternoon paid into John's account one thousand pounds for my year's keep.

JOHN I refuse to take it.

CONSTANCE Well, you'll damned well have to.

MRS CULVER There's no object in losing your temper.

CONSTANCE I have mine under perfect control.

JOHN If you think what they call free love is fun you're mistaken. Believe me, it's the most overrated amusement that was ever invented.

CONSTANCE In that case, I wonder why people continue to indulge in it.

JOHN I ought to know what I'm talking about, hang it all. It has all the inconveniences of marriage and none of its advantages. I assure you, my dear, the game is not worth the candle.

CONSTANCE You may be right, but you know how hard it is to profit by anybody's experience I think I'd like to see for myself

MRS CULVER Are you in love with Bernard?

CONSTANCE To tell you the truth I haven't quite made up my mind How does one know if one's in love?

MRS CULVER My dear, I only know one test Could you use his tooth-brush?

CONSTANCE No

MRS CULVER Then you're not in love with him

CONSTANCE He's adored me for fifteen years There's something in that long devotion which gives me a funny little feeling in my heart I should like to do something to show him that I'm not ungrateful You see, in six weeks he goes back to Japan There is no chance of his coming to England again for seven years I'm thirty-six now and he adores me, in seven years I shall be forty-three A woman of forty-three is often charming, but it's seldom that a man of fifty-five is crazy about her I came to the conclusion that it must be now or never and so I asked him if he'd like me to spend these last six weeks with him in Italy When I wave my handkerchief to him as the ship that takes him sails out of the harbour at Naples I hope that he will feel that all those years of unselfish love have been well worth the while

JOHN Six weeks Do you intend to leave him at the end of six weeks?

CONSTANCE Oh, yes, of course It's because I'm putting a limit to our love that I think it may achieve the perfection of something that is beautiful and transitory Why, John, what is it that makes a rose so lovely but that its petals fall as soon as it is full blown?

JOHN It's all come as such a shock and a surprise that I hardly know what to say. You've got me at a complete disadvantage

[MRS. CULVER, *who has been standing at the window, gives a little cry*

CONSTANCE What is it?

MRS CULVER Here is Bernard He's just driven up to the door.

JOHN Do you expect me to receive him as if I were blissfully unconscious of your plans?

CONSTANCE It would be more comfortable It would be stupid to make a scene and it wouldn't prevent my going on this little jaunt with him

JOHN I have my dignity to think of

CONSTANCE One often preserves that best by putting it in one's pocket It would be kind of you, John, to treat him just as pleasantly as I treated Marie-Louise when I knew she was your mistress

JOHN Does he know that I know?

CONSTANCE Of course not He's a little conventional, you know, and he couldn't happily deceive a friend if he thought there was no deception

MRS CULVER Constance, is there nothing I can say to make you reconsider your decision?

CONSTANCE Nothing, darling

MRS CULVER Then I may just as well save my breath I'll slip away before he comes

CONSTANCE Oh, all right Good-bye, mother I'll send you a lot of picture post-cards

MRS CULVER I don't approve of you, Constance, and I can't pretend that I do No good will come of it Men were meant by nature to be wicked and delightful and deceive their wives, and women were meant to be virtuous and forgiving and to suffer verbosely That was ordained from all eternity and none of your new-fangled notions can alter the decrees of Providence

[*The BUTLER enters, followed by BERNARD*

BENTLEY Mr Kersal

MRS CULVER How do you do, Bernard, and good-bye
I'm just going

BERNARD Oh, I'm sorry Good-bye

[She goes out]

CONSTANCE *[To BERNARD]* How d'you do? Just one
moment *[To the BUTLER]* Oh, Bentley, get my things
downstairs and put them in a taxi, will you?

BENTLEY Very good, madam

BERNARD Are you just starting? It's lucky I came when I
did I should have hated to miss you

CONSTANCE And let me know when the taxi's here.

BENTLEY Yes, madam

CONSTANCE Now I can attend to you

[The BUTLER goes out]

BERNARD Are you looking forward to your holiday?

CONSTANCE Immensely I've never gone on a jaunt like this
before, and I'm really quite excited

BERNARD You're going alone, aren't you?

CONSTANCE Oh, yes, quite alone

BERNARD It's rotten for you not to be able to get away, old
man

JOHN Rotten

BERNARD I suppose these are the penalties of greatness I
can quite understand that you have to think of your
patients first

JOHN Quite

CONSTANCE Of course John doesn't very much care for
Italy

BERNARD Oh, are you going to Italy? I thought you said
Spain

JOHN No, she always said Italy

BERNARD Oh, well, that's hardly your mark, is it, old boy?
Though I believe there are some sporting links on the
Lake of Como

JOHN: Are there?

BERNARD I suppose there's no chance of your being anywhere near Naples towards the end of July?

CONSTANCE I don't really know My plans are quite vague

BERNARD I was only asking because I'm sailing from Naples It would be fun if we met there

JOHN Great fun

CONSTANCE I hope you'll see a lot of John while I'm away
I'm afraid he'll be a trifle lonely, poor darling Why don't you dine together one day next week?

BERNARD I'm terribly sorry, but you know I'm going away

CONSTANCE Oh, are you? I thought you were going to stay in London till you had to start for Japan

BERNARD I meant to, but my doctor has ordered me to go and do a cure

JOHN What sort of a cure?

BERNARD Oh, just a cure He says I want bucking up

JOHN. Oh, does he? What's the name of your doctor?

BERNARD No one you ever heard of A man I used to know in the war

JOHN Oh!

BERNARD So I'm afraid this is good-bye Of course, it's a wrench leaving London, especially as I don't expect to be in Europe again for some years, but I always think it rather silly not to take a man's advice when you've asked for it

JOHN More especially when he's charged you three guineas.

CONSTANCE I'm sorry I was counting on you to keep John out of mischief during my absence

BERNARD I'm not sure if I could guarantee to do that But we might have done a few theatres together and had a game of golf or two

CONSTANCE It would have been jolly, wouldn't it, John?

JOHN Very jolly

[The BUTLER comes in]

BENTLEY The taxi's waiting, madam

CONSTANCE Thank you

[The BUTLER goes out]

BERNARD I'll take myself off In case I don't see you again I'd like to thank you now for all your kindness to me during the year I've spent in London.

CONSTANCE It's been very nice to see you

BERNARD You and John have been most awfully good to me I never imagined I was going to have such a wonderful time

CONSTANCE We shall miss you terribly It's been a great comfort to John to think that there was someone to take me out when he had to be away on one of his operations Hasn't it, darling?

JOHN Yes, darling

CONSTANCE When he knew I was with you he never worried Did you, darling?

JOHN No, darling

BERNARD I'm awfully glad if I've been able to make myself useful Don't forget me entirely, will you?

CONSTANCE We're not likely to do that, are we, darling?

JOHN No, darling

BERNARD And if you ever have a moment to spare you will write to me, won't you? You don't know how much it means to us exiles.

CONSTANCE Of course we will We'll both write Won't we, darling?

JOHN Yes, darling

CONSTANCE John writes such a good letter So chatty, you know, and amusing

BERNARD That's a promise Well, good-bye, old boy Have a good time

JOHN Thanks, old bean

BERNARD Good-bye, Constance There's so much I want to say to you that I don't know where to begin

JOHN I don't want to hurry you, but the taxi is just ticking its head off

BERNARD John is so matter-of-fact Well, I'll say nothing then but God bless you

CONSTANCE Au revoir

BERNARD If you do go to Naples you will let me know, won't you? If you send a line to my club, it'll be forwarded at once

CONSTANCE Oh, all right.

BERNARD Good-bye

[He gives them both a friendly nod and goes out CONSTANCE begins to giggle and soon is seized with uncontrollable laughter]

JOHN Will you kindly tell me what there is to laugh at? If you think it amuses me to stand here like patience on a monument and have my leg pulled you're mistaken What did you mean by all that halderdash about meeting you by chance in Naples?

CONSTANCE He was throwing you off the scent.

JOHN The man's a drivelling idiot

CONSTANCE D'you think so? I thought he was rather ingenious Considering he hasn't had very much practice in this sort of thing I thought he did very well

JOHN Of course if you're determined to find him a pattern of perfection it's useless for me to attempt to argue. But honestly, speaking without prejudice for or against, I'm sorry to think of you throwing yourself away on a man like that.

CONSTANCE Perhaps it's natural that a man and his wife should differ in their estimate of her prospective lover.

JOHN You're not going to tell me he's better-looking than I am.

CONSTANCE No. You have always been my ideal of manly beauty.

JOHN He's no better dressed than I am.

CONSTANCE He could hardly expect to be. He goes to the same tailor.

JOHN I don't think you can honestly say he's more amusing than I am.

CONSTANCE No, I honestly can't.

JOHN Then in Heaven's name why do you want to go away with him?

CONSTANCE Shall I tell you? Once more before it's too late I want to feel about me the arms of a man who adores the ground I walk on. I want to see his face light up when I enter the room. I want to feel the pressure of his hand when we look at the moon together and the pleasantly tickling sensation when his arm tremulously steals around my waist. I want to let my hand fall on his shoulder and feel his lips softly touch my hair.

JOHN The operation is automatically impossible, the poor devil would get such a crick in the neck he wouldn't know what to do.

CONSTANCE I want to walk along country lanes holding hands and I want to be called by absurd pet names. I want to talk baby-talk by the hour together.

JOHN Oh, God.

CONSTANCE I want to know that I'm eloquent and witty when I'm dead silent For ten years I've been very happy in your affection, John, we've been the best and dearest friends, but now just for a little while I hanker for something else Do you grudge it me? I want to be loved

JOHN But, my dear, I'll love you I've been a brute, I've neglected you, it's not too late and you're the only woman I've ever really cared for I'll chuck everything and we'll go away together

CONSTANCE The prospect does not thrill me

JOHN Come, darling, have a heart I gave up Marie-Louise Surely you can give up Bernard

CONSTANCE But you gave up Marie-Louise to please yourself, not to please me

JOHN Don't be a little beast, Constance Come away with me We'll have such a lark

CONSTANCE Oh, my poor John, I didn't work so hard to gain my economic independence in order to go on a honeymoon with my own husband

JOHN Do you think I can't be a lover as well as a husband?

CONSTANCE My dear, no one can make yesterday's cold mutton into to-morrow's lamb cutlets

JOHN You know what you're doing I was determined in future to be a model husband and you're driving me right into the arms of Marie-Louise I give you my word of honour that the moment you leave this house I shall drive straight to her door

CONSTANCE I should hate you to have a fruitless journey I'm afraid you won't find her at home She has a new young man and she says he's too divine.

JOHN What!

CONSTANCE He's the A D C of a Colonial Governor She came here to-day to ask me to break the news to you that henceforth everything was over between you.

JOHN I hope you told her first that I was firmly resolved to terminate a connection that could only cause you pain

CONSTANCE I couldn't She was in such a blooming hurry to give me her message

JOHN Really, Constance, for your own pride I should have thought you wouldn't like her to make a perfect fool of me Any other woman would have said, What a strange coincidence Why it's only half an hour since John told me he had made up his mind never to see you again But of course you don't care two straws for me any more, that's quite evident

CONSTANCE Oh, don't be unjust, darling I shall always care for you I may be unfaithful, but I am constant I always think that's my most endearing quality

[*The BUTLER opens the door*]

JOHN [*Irritably*] What is it?

BENTLEY I thought madam had forgotten that the taxi was at the door

JOHN Go to hell

BENTLEY Very good, sir

[*He goes out*]

CONSTANCE I don't see why you should be rude to him Bernard will pay the taxi Anyhow I must go now or he'll begin to think I'm not coming Good-bye, darling I hope you'll get on all right in my absence Just give the cook her head and you'll have no trouble Won't you say good-bye to me?

JOHN Go to the devil

CONSTANCE All right I shall be back in six weeks.

JOHN Back? Where?

CONSTANCE Here

JOHN Here? Here? Do you think I'm going to take you back?

CONSTANCE I don't see why not When you've had time to reflect you'll realise that you have no reason to blame me After all, I'm taking from you nothing that you want

JOHN Are you aware that I can divorce you for this?

CONSTANCE Quite But I married very prudently I took the precaution to marry a gentleman and I know that you could never bring yourself to divorce me for doing no more than you did yourself

JOHN I wouldn't divorce you I wouldn't expose my worst enemy to the risk of marrying a woman who's capable of treating her husband as you're treating me

CONSTANCE [*At the door*] Well, then, shall I come back?

JOHN [*After a moment's hesitation*] You are the most maddening, wilful, capricious, wrong-headed, delightful and enchanting woman man was ever cursed with having for a wife Yes, damn you, come back

[She lightly kisses her hand to him and slips out, slamming the door behind her]

THE END

THE BREAD-WINNER

A COMEDY

in One Act

CHARACTERS

CHARLES BATTLE

MARGERY, *his wife.*

JUDY, *his daughter*

PATRICK, *his son*

ALFRED GRANGER

DOROTHY, *his wife*

DIANA, *his daughter.*

TIMOTHY, *his son*

The action of the play is continuous, and takes place in the drawing-room of the Battles' house at Golders Green. In order to rest the audience the curtain is lowered twice during the performance.

THE BREAD - WINNER

SCENE I

A well-furnished drawing-room, in the modern style but without excess, an airy, sunny room looking on to the handsome suburban garden

When the curtain rises JUDY and PATRICK are discovered PATRICK is in flannels He is a nice-looking boy of eighteen He is lying on the sofa very comfortably, reading an illustrated paper, others are scattered about him on the floor JUDY is seventeen She is pretty, blond and self-possessed She also is dressed in tennis things She is standing at the gramophone, and has just put on a new record However brusquely PATRICK and JUDY talk, and however frank they are in expressing their opinions, they remain engaging and delightful The same applies to their friends DIANA and TIMOTHY

PATRICK [*Without looking up from his paper*] Aren't you sick of that yet?

JUDY My dear child, it's absolutely new It was only written last week, and the record came out yesterday morning

PATRICK Rot I was weaned on it I vividly remember mother turning it on to get me to take the bottle quietly

JUDY Liar! It's rather jolly to dance to Come on.

PATRICK [*Without moving*] Oh, God!

JUDY Slacker

PATRICK I wish Tim and Dinah would hurry up.

JUDY What's the time? She said they'd come immediately after lunch.

PATRICK Ring them up and tell them to hurry up

JUDY [*Amiably*] Ring them up yourself

PATRICK Lazy hound

JUDY Tim's going back next term after all He wanted to go up to Cambridge with you, but Alfred said he must stay at school another year

PATRICK He's only seventeen

JUDY He'll be eighteen in December

PATRICK There's all the difference between being eighteen now and eighteen in December I should have thought that was obvious to the meanest intelligence

JUDY Here they are [*She goes to the door and opens it*] Dinah!

DIANA [*Outside*] Hulloo!

JUDY We're in here Bring your rackets along.

DIANA Right-ho

[She comes in, a dark pretty girl of eighteen and a bit, with fine eyes and a fresh colour She has a racket in her hand She is followed by her brother TIMOTHY He is a year younger than she, and, as we have heard, will not be eighteen till December He is a slim, tall, dark youth wearing a gay blazer and a muffler, and he carries two rackets PATRICK gets up from the sofa]

PATRICK Hulloo, Dinah.

DIANA Hulloo

PATRICK I forget, do we kiss?

DIANA Only at dances under the influence of claret cup

PATRICK Hulloo, Tim. How are you?

TIMOTHY All right How are you?

PATRICK [*Pointing to the two rackets.*] I say, what's the idea?

TIMOTHY I've come on in my game a bit lately One must have two rackets, you know

PATRICK Wimbledon Eh, what?

DIANA Tim is now a blood

PATRICK I hear you're going back next term

TIMOTHY Rotten, isn't it? Alfred's being frightfully tiresome

PATRICK How is your respected parent?

TIMOTHY Very facetious

DIANA Few people know how exhausting it is to have a humorist in the family

PATRICK I'm thankful to say that's not one of our troubles
You'd have to get an axe to get father to see that you're making a joke

JUDY Poor Daddy, no one could say that he has a sense of humour

TIMOTHY Have you plied him with liquor?

PATRICK It has no effect, it's constitutional.

DIANA When did you get back, Pat?

PATRICK Just before lunch

TIMOTHY We broke up the day before yesterday.

DIANA Are you glad to have left school?

PATRICK Rather! I didn't have a bad time, you know But
I want to go up to Cambridge now I think it'll be rather fun

JUDY I think he's grown since Easter, don't you, Dinah?

PATRICK I'm sure I have I can tell by my dinner-jacket
I'm going to order some new tails to-morrow.

TIMOTHY Who are you going to?

PATRICK Well, I don't know I suppose Daddy'll want me
to go to his tailor as usual But I'm going to tell him that
of course he's all right for him, but honestly he's not
smart enough for me.

DIANA I shall take off my hat [*She does so, and shakes her shingled head*] Lend me your comb, Tim

TIMOTHY [*Looking in his pocket*] Oh damn, I left it at home

JUDY Pat'll lend you his

PATRICK [*Taking a comb out of his pocket*] Here you are

[He gives it to her, and taking a little glass from her bag she combs her hair Then JUDY takes the comb from her and runs it through her hair]

TIMOTHY Are you still going in for the Bar, Pat?

PATRICK Oh, yes I think so After all, it's the only profession that really gives you a chance It'll be rather fun coming up to town to eat my dinners

TIMOTHY Let me have the comb a minute

[He takes it and combs his perfectly ordered hair He returns it to PATRICK, who mechanically does the same, and then puts it back in his pocket]

PATRICK Of course I shall go in for politics

DIANA Which side?

PATRICK Well, I haven't really made up my mind yet Daddy's always been a liberal, but there's nothing to be got out of being a liberal now I think the only thing now is labour

DIANA I'm labour I always have been

PATRICK They want people like us, public school and varsity, and that sort of thing

TIMOTHY Of course you're lucky, you can go in for anything you like I've got to go into Alfred's rotten old business

DIANA You can't blame Alfred It's an old-established firm, and he wants his only son to follow in his footsteps

TIMOTHY Can you see me as respectable family lawyer?

PATRICK Perfectly, and I can see you giving me fat briefs

TIMOTHY I'll tell you one thing, I'm not going to live at home

PATRICK They couldn't expect you to do that I don't mind coming here during the vac for a bit when I haven't got anywhere better to go, but as soon as I settle down in London I'm going to tell Daddy that I must have a flat

TIMOTHY We might share one

PATRICK That's not a bad idea I've got rather a fancy for Albemarle Street personally

TIMOTHY That would do me all right As long as it's absolutely central I don't care where I live

PATRICK It's a damned good address And one must have that

TIMOTHY Absolutely

DIANA I'm simply fed up with the suburbs

PATRICK So am I Fed to the teeth

JUDY I can't imagine why they want to live out in the wilds like this

PATRICK Poor Mummy thinks this is such a nice neighbourhood

JUDY It was all very well when we were kids We had to have fresh air and all that sort of rot But now we're grown up I can't see the point of it

DIANA Would you believe it? Dorothy thinks it's central When I tell her it's the back of beyond, she says, My dear, what are you talking about? It's only twelve minutes by tube from Piccadilly Circus

PATRICK One's people are really extraordinary You know, ours haven't begun to realise that we are grown up

JUDY Mummy still wants to buy my clothes for me I had to make the devil of a row before I could get my own dress allowance

TIMOTHY I will say that for Alfred, he's given us an allowance ever since we were fifteen.

PATRICK I'm expecting to have a bit of a dust up with father over my allowance at Cambridge I'm going to ask for five hundred

TIMOTHY Do you think he'll give you that?

PATRICK No, but I think he'll give me four If I ask for four he'll try and get off for three-fifty

TIMOTHY He oughtn't to kick at that

PATRICK He oughtn't to kick at anything After all, I didn't ask to be brought into the world He did it entirely for his own amusement, and he's had a lot of fun out of me He must be prepared to pay for it

TIMOTHY That's fair enough

PATRICK When I settle down in London he'll have to give me at least five hundred a year Everybody knows that you can't earn a living at the Bar till you're thirty

TIMOTHY If Alfred gave me the same, we ought to be able to do ourselves pretty well in a flat

DIANA It makes me perfectly sick when I hear you two talk of having a flat in town I'd love to have one of my own Wouldn't you, Judy?

JUDY Simply love it

DIANA I'm sick of living at home

PATRICK Why don't you marry?

DIANA Oh, I'm not going to marry for years yet I want to marry when I'm twenty-four. I want to have a good time first

JUDY Oh, I think that's rather old I want to marry when I'm twenty-one

PATRICK Why don't you tell Alfred that you want your own flat?

DIANA Can you see his face? [*Imitating her father*] I've made a jolly good home for my kiddies, old boy, and between you and I, I don't mind telling you they think there's no place like it

PATRICK [*With a smile*] Poor Alfred

DIANA Alfred's all right. He means well

TIMOTHY Only he's so terribly hearty

DIANA I think it's rather pathetic sometimes, his delusion that one's really going to look upon one's parents as friends

TIMOTHY It's so shy-making, his one boy to another stunt

DIANA Well, you know, it's got its advantages Call him old bean, and you can get anything you want out of him

PATRICK It's so damned humiliating having to play up to one's people all the time

DIANA What else can you do? They have an idea about you in their heads and you have to live up to it They're incapable of understanding that you're not in the least what they think you are

TIMOTHY I shall never forget when I was leaving my prep school, and Dorothy told Alfred he must tell me what she called the facts of life

PATRICK Oh, God!

TIMOTHY I've never seen Alfred in such a twitter He was trying to be terribly hearty, and he got as red as a turkey-cock I could see the sweat simply pouring down his face

PATRICK. What did you do?

TIMOTHY 'What could I do? I couldn't very well say to him, Look here, Alfred, you're about three years too late with all this, there's not much you can tell me I don't know

DIANA Our dear little innocent Timothy.

TIMOTHY So I just did the little blushing boy stunt, and let him get it off his chest And then he gave me a pound and said, You'd better take your sister to a matinée.

PATRICK How is our respected parent these days, Judy?

JUDY Oh, I don't know, same as usual

DIANA Of course you haven't seen him yet?

PATRICK No I suppose he'll be getting back from the City presently I was only asking because I've been wondering if there was any chance of getting a car out of him

TIMOTHY I say, that would be grand

PATRICK Well, now I've left school I ought to have a car of my own It's absurd that I should have to go about in the family bus [To JUDY] Have you said anything to Mummy about it?

JUDY She says it all depends on how things are on the Stock Exchange

PATRICK They're all rolling on the Stock Exchange As long as the world is full of mugs, stock-brokers are bound to make money

DIANA You know, I like your father, Pat

JUDY Very dull, poor darling

DIANA I'm not sure that I wouldn't rather have a dull father than a funny one

PATRICK Fortunately we don't see much of him except at dinner And that's pretty ghastly, isn't it, Judy?

JUDY Ghastly isn't the word

PATRICK Daddy sitting at one end of the table never opening his mouth, and mother improving our minds with bright chat about art and literature

DIANA That's home life

PATRICK Well, I've had about enough of it, I can tell you D'you think that when *we're* their age we shall be as boring as they are?

JUDY Oh, I don't see why we should for a moment.

TIMOTHY. How old is your father, Pat?

PATRICK I think he's forty-two, isn't he, Judy?

JUDY Yes, he was comparatively young when he married
Mummy Twenty-three

DIANA One of those awful war marriages, I suppose Like
Alfred and Dorothy

JUDY Oh, no They must have been married before that
Pat's eighteen

DIANA Well, when was the war?

TIMOTHY Oh, don't let's talk of that old war I'm fed to the
teeth with it

JUDY What a bore the people are who went through it

PATRICK Crashing

JUDY When they get together and start talking about their
experiences I could scream

DIANA I know As if anyone cared

TIMOTHY They were a dreary lot, that war generation

DIANA Well, don't forget that except for the war there
would have been a lot more of them

TIMOTHY They don't amount to anything any more
They're finished and done with, thank God

DIANA Unfortunately some of them don't know it

JUDY Well, I'm going to make it my business to tell them
whenever I have an opportunity

PATRICK After all, let's face it, people aren't any good after
forty, are they? They're only in the way, and life can't be
any pleasure to them

DIANA I don't suppose it is much, but what are you to do
with them? You can't drown them like puppies

TIMOTHY It's obvious that people live much too long now

PATRICK If nature were properly organised they'd just drop
off quite quietly at the age of forty

DIANA D'you think they'd like it?

PATRICK I don't see why they should mind They've had
their day They've done everything they're capable of

doing Look at all the poets and painters and so on What on earth have they done that was worth while after they were forty? What's the good of hanging on, a burden to yourself and everyone connected with you? It would be much better if they just passed out quietly, like the mayflies when they've had their little bit of nonsense

JUDY Of course, I don't expect to live till I'm forty Fancy being thirty-six I shall die when I'm twenty-nine

DIANA Have you made your will?

JUDY No, but I've been thinking about it

TIMOTHY You might leave me those jade buttons of yours They'd make rather nice links

JUDY Oh, I'm going to be buried with all my jewellery I made up my mind about that years ago

PATRICK Don't talk rot I'm being serious In a well-regulated state at a certain age everyone should be put painlessly out of existence.

DIANA Without exception?

PATRICK Of course

DIANA It would be rather a wrench when it came to one's own people

PATRICK Of course, it would be a wrench But one would have to sacrifice one's private feelings to the common good Take our case, for instance Judy and I are quite fond of father and mother Aren't we, Judy?

JUDY Yes We're as fond of them as anyone can be of their people

PATRICK But we're not blind to their defects Mummy is terribly arty and highbrow. And poor Daddy has no sense of humour.

JUDY Absolutely

PATRICK They've always been very nice to us. They've sent us to decent schools and given us a good time in the

holidays And we've always been very decent to them
We've never given them any trouble I think we've been
rather a credit to them

DIANA On the whole

PATRICK But now it's quite obvious that their use is
ended They can only hamper us in future We're
grown up and we want our freedom

TIMOTHY You're absolutely right, Patrick

PATRICK Of course, I'm right I'm not just talking through
my hat I've thought about this a great deal We've
arrived at an age now when we ought to be on our own
We've got the whole world before us. We can't afford to
be What's the word I want?

DIANA Footled about

JUDY Tied

PATRICK Trammelled, that's it Trammelled by domestic
ties

TIMOTHY It is damned unfair, there's no doubt about
that

PATRICK Unfair isn't the word It's damned unjust That's
what it is They've had their fling and now they want to
prevent us from having ours After all one must have
money And one wants it when one's young What's the
good of money to middle-aged people?

DIANA They do spend it in the most idiotic way One can't
deny that

PATRICK Daddy's been on the Stock Exchange for a good
many years and he must have made a packet It does
seem a bit thick that Judy and I should have to wait for it
till we're too old to spend it

DIANA Of course, all that's true But it does seem rather
drastic to kill the poor old things off

JUDY I don't believe you'd have the heart to do it, Pat?

PATRICK I daresay when it came to the point I should hesitate. One has one's feelings. After all, it's a rotten thing having to put an old dog out of its sufferings.

JUDY Don't speak of it. God, how I cried when we had to send poor old Bonzo to the vet's to have him destroyed.

PATRICK It made *me* feel a bit funny, I don't mind telling you.

JUDY I shall never have a dog I love so much.

PATRICK I don't want to be cruel. I merely said that in a well-regulated state when people have outlived their utility, say at forty, they ought to be put out of their misery. But we don't live in a well-regulated state, and I don't suppose we ever shall.

TIMOTHY I don't know about that. Our generation hasn't had a chance yet.

PATRICK Personally I'd be quite willing to compromise.

DIANA How'd you mean?

PATRICK Well, at forty I'd make people retire and hand over all their property to their children. If they hadn't any property the state would support them and, of course, if they had, their children would make them an allowance.

TIMOTHY That's not a bad idea.

PATRICK Judy and I would give our people two hundred and fifty a year. That would be quite enough. They could have a little cottage in the country. Mother could keep chickens and Daddy could potter about the garden. I think they'd be awfully happy.

JUDY Mummy always has said that's just the sort of thing she'd love.

DIANA Do you think two hundred and fifty would be enough?

PATRICK Oh, quite. You see, they'd grow their own vegetables and then there'd be the eggs.

JUDY I say, what a lark we could have.

DIANA What would you do?

PATRICK The first thing would be to sell the house and take a flat in town. Judy and I could live together till she married.

JUDY I know the first thing I'd do. I'd join every night club in London.

PATRICK I'd hunt. We could probably run to a little hunting-box somewhere in my constituency. And I could kill two birds with one stone that way.

TIMOTHY I'd have the fastest car made and my own aeroplane.

DIANA I don't know what I'd do. Of course, I'd get all my clothes in Paris.

JUDY. I think we'd make things hum.

PATRICK There's no doubt in my mind we'd run the world a damned sight better than it's ever been run before. Why should the old think that they know better than we do? They belong to the past. We're the future and the future's ours. Why shouldn't we do what we like with our own property?

DIANA You have come on since last holidays, Pat.

PATRICK Three months is a long time. I've been thinking a lot about things in general.

TIMOTHY I wish I had your gift of the gab.

PATRICK It's not necessary for you. You're only going to be a solicitor. You must have it at the Bar.

JUDY There's Mummy.

PATRICK Oh, let's go and play tennis then.

TIMOTHY Come on.

JUDY How are we going to play?

[As they get up, TIMOTHY taking his rackets, the door is opened and MARGERY and DOROTHY come in. MARGERY is a pretty, slightly faded blonde, and

DOROTHY *is dark, like her daughter, and rather alluring Her pose is suppressed passion They are both under forty, smartly dressed and a good deal made up Neither is the decrepit old creature you might have suspected from listening to their children's conversation, and neither has the slightest idea that her day is over*

MARGERY You lazy people, why aren't you playing tennis?

JUDY We're just going to, Mummy

PATRICK Hulloo, Aunt Dorothy.

DOROTHY You've grown, Pat

MARGERY Isn't he enormous?

[DOROTHY *kisses* PATRICK *on the cheek*

DOROTHY [*Archly*] I'm not quite sure if Alfred would approve of my kissing such a grown-up young man

PATRICK After all, you are my aunt

DOROTHY Not really, of course Your mother and I are only first cousins

DIANA She means that except for Alfred you and she could marry

DOROTHY Don't be so silly, Dinah

TIMOTHY It's not a bad idea If Alfred's run over by a motor-bus you shall marry Dorothy, Pat I think you'd make me a very good father

PATRICK I wouldn't let you call me by my Christian name I should insist on your calling me Papa

MARGERY Run along, you idiots Dorothy and I want to talk.

TIMOTHY Come on, you kids

PATRICK [*Going out*] No rest for the weary

[*The four young things go* MARGERY and DOROTHY *settle themselves down for a gossip by getting their lipsticks and mirrors out of their bags and starting to paint their lips.*

DOROTHY What a nice-looking boy Pat is growing You'll have to keep an eye on him, darling You know what women are

MARGERY Oh, I'm not frightened He's absolutely innocent And he tells me everything

DOROTHY They talk a lot of nonsense about the young nowadays. I don't believe they know half as much as we did at their age.

MARGERY I wish they wouldn't grow up quite so quickly When Pat came back from school this morning, it gave me quite a shock

DOROTHY I don't care It's not like before the war People don't grow old like they used to When Dinah and I go out together we're always taken for sisters

MARGERY I honestly don't think you look a day older than she does But then you're dark That gives you such an advantage When you're blonde like me you fade

DOROTHY You haven't Why, I was only thinking at dinner last night how lovely your hair looked

MARGERY It's several shades darker than when I was a girl I was wondering if anyone would notice if I had it touched up a little

DOROTHY Of course, it does make the face look harder

MARGERY Oh, I wouldn't have it dyed I'd only just have a few *reflets d'or* put in Ernest said he could do it so that not a soul would know it wasn't natural

DOROTHY Well, I know someone who likes you very much as you are

MARGERY Dorothy! As a matter of fact I don't know what you're talking about

DOROTHY Come off it, Marge Do you think I haven't got eyes in my head? Why, it was obvious last night

MARGERY You don't think it was, really?

DOROTHY Well, it was obvious to me I've been dying to know what he said to you

MARGERY I suppose those children really are playing tennis?

DOROTHY Oh, yes I'm simply thrilled, Marge

MARGERY Well, he said he was quite crazy about me He said he'd been wanting to tell me for a long time, but knowing Charlie on the Stock Exchange and all that sort of thing, he hadn't liked to But he simply couldn't help himself

DOROTHY During dinner, was that, or afterwards?

MARGERY Well, he began during dinner, but not seriously, you know Lightly He didn't really get serious till afterwards when we'd been dancing

DOROTHY Does he dance well?

MARGERY Divinely

DOROTHY I suppose he wanted to see how you'd take it Men are rather cautious I suppose they don't want to get snubbed Tell me what you said to him

MARGERY Well, of course, I laughed I said, Do you realise that I have two children who are practically grown up? He said he didn't believe it He said he'd bet a monkey that I wasn't a day more than twenty-five What is a monkey, darling?

DOROTHY A thousand pounds and a pony's five hundred I can't think why men don't say five hundred pounds when they mean five hundred pounds

MARGERY It does seem silly, doesn't it?

DOROTHY Go on, dear

MARGERY Then I said, I've got a girl of seventeen I didn't say anything about Pat I thought if he liked to think he was younger he could.

DOROTHY I don't blame you.

MARGERY Then he said, Well, all I can say is, you must have been married out of your cradle So then I gave

him a look and I said, Well, I wasn't very old, I admit

DOROTHY I know exactly how you said it Sweeping the floor with your eyelashes so to speak I've seen you do it dozens of times and it always gets them

MARGERY It's quite unconscious I never mean to Then he took my hand and said, I wonder if you know how much more attractive it is to be a grown woman than a silly slip of a girl

DOROTHY Men always say that And I'm sure it's true Men don't fall in love with girls They're not interesting enough

MARGERY I suppose there's something in that

DOROTHY And what happened next?

MARGERY He asked me what Charlie does on Sundays Oh, I said, he goes and plays golf Good old Charlie, he said Then he asked me if I wouldn't go motoring with him in the country

DOROTHY And are you going?

MARGERY Of course not Why, I hardly know the man

DOROTHY You can't expect to get to know the man if you never see him

MARGERY It wouldn't be fair to the children

DOROTHY Charlie goes and has a good time playing golf I don't see why you shouldn't go motoring if you want to

MARGERY You know what I am, Dorothy

DOROTHY I don't believe you're as cold as you pretend

MARGERY Perhaps not But Charlie's never looked at another woman since he married me I shouldn't like to do anything to hurt his feelings

DOROTHY It wouldn't hurt his feelings if he didn't know I don't say go too far, but a flirtation can do no one any

harm And everyone knows there's nothing like having a man pay her a little attention to make a woman look young

MARGERY Of course, there's something in that

DOROTHY You know as well as I do that in all the time we've been married I've never been unfaithful to Alfred But I've had scores of beaux That's what's kept me fresh and alert and up to date

MARGERY It's true that one wants something to make up for married life

DOROTHY No one could want a better husband than Alfred, and I'm sure he's always been absolutely faithful to me, but I could never have stood his heartiness for all these years if I hadn't had my little flirtations on the side

MARGERY What a mercy it is that men have to go to business every day What would one do if they were about the house all day long?

DOROTHY How has Charlie been lately?

MARGERY Well, you've seen him Just the same as ever He never changes

DOROTHY Of course, I've seen for ages that he rather bores you

MARGERY Nineteen years is a long time to be married

DOROTHY Too long, if you ask me

MARGERY I suppose I've got nothing to complain of really. He gives me everything I want

DOROTHY And you never quarrel, do you?

MARGERY Oh, never And he never fusses. But, of course, he is limited.

DOROTHY Men are. I've noticed that often.

MARGERY He isn't interested in art and literature like I am. When I have intellectual people up at the house he always seems rather out of it.

DOROTHY Yes, I've noticed that Of course, he's awfully nice, but he's not exactly what you'd call brilliant, is he?

MARGERY No, I'm afraid he isn't, poor darling I suppose one can't have everything, and he's just as much in love with me to-day as the day we were married It's rather beastly of me to find fault with him

DOROTHY That's not finding fault One can't be married to a man all those years without knowing what he is and what he isn't.

MARGERY I shudder to think what would happen if he ever suspected that for years now I haven't cared for him, I mean, really cared

DOROTHY That's one advantage we have, men don't see things

MARGERY Of course, I like him, you know, and I wouldn't do anything to wound him But I am an intelligent woman, and I can't help seeing he's a bit of a bore

DOROTHY If you don't mind my saying so, darling, the fact is, he has no sense of humour

MARGERY I know It's tragic I'm going to say something dreadful to you, Dorothy Have you ever asked yourself what you'd do if you were a widow?

DOROTHY What woman hasn't?

MARGERY Of course, I'd be dreadfully upset if anything happened to poor Charlie I'd simply cry my eyes out, and at first I'd miss him dreadfully

DOROTHY That's only natural I don't know anyone who's got so much heart as you have

MARGERY But when once I'd got over the shock I believe I'd be very happy, you know.

DOROTHY I'm sure you would With your fair hair you'd look too lovely in mourning

MARGERY I'd never marry again. I think every woman should marry, but once is enough

DOROTHY Oh, I like having a man about the house I think I'd be dreadfully lost without one

MARGERY Well, I have so many resources in myself It would be lovely to be able to do exactly as you liked without consulting anybody And having your own friends And being free to run over to Paris or down to the Riviera without thinking Of course Charlie can't get away and the poor old thing'll be so lost without me And then there's one's own self-development You can't really develop your personality properly when you're married

DOROTHY Speaking of the Riviera, have you said anything to Charlie about the summer?

MARGERY It's rather difficult Charlie wants to go on the river like we always do, so that he can go up to the city when he wants to

DOROTHY Why shouldn't Alfred and Charlie go on the river together? It's so silly of husbands and wives always to take their holidays together It's no change for either of them

MARGERY It would be lovely for the children

DOROTHY They wouldn't interfere with us at all They'd be bathing and boating all the time and they're too young to go into the Baccarat rooms. My dear, we'd have the time of our lives

MARGERY It sounds too divine

DOROTHY I saw some lovely pyjamas in Bond Street the other day You know they wear pyjamas all day long in summer

MARGERY I know I suppose it would be frightfully expensive

DOROTHY What is the use of money if you don't spend it? And you can always tell Charlie it would be such an education for the children

[PATRICK *appears, followed immediately by the others*

PATRICK I say, Mummy, it is disgraceful, the court wasn't marked out

MARGERY Oh, I am sorry

PATRICK I've given the gardener hell He had the damned cheek to say he hadn't had any orders

MARGERY How stupid of him I know I meant to tell him

PATRICK The moment my back is turned everything goes wrong in this house

MARGERY Is he doing it now?

PATRICK Yes, but it won't be ready for a quarter of an hour
I don't know why Judy couldn't see about it What's she there for?

JUDY You seem to think I have nothing to do I was fearfully busy this morning, and I forgot

PATRICK Well, you shouldn't forget

MARGERY Don't be disagreeable the moment you get back, darling There's lots of time

DIANA Let's go and have a glass of lemonade Tim and I are simply parched

MARGERY It's in the dining-room You'll find it on the sideboard

PATRICK I don't know why we can't have a hard court It's absurd to ask people to play on grass now

TIMOTHY I've told Alfred that we absolutely must have one at our place I mean, you can't expect to improve your game if you have to play on grass all the time

PATRICK You might talk to father, Mummy After all, if he wants us to live at home the least he can do is to provide us with the ordinary necessities of existence

MARGERY It would be an awful expense

TIMOTHY You can get a very decent hard court for about four hundred pounds.

PATRICK That's nothing Daddy couldn't jib at that He hasn't got anything to do with his money except spend it on us

MARGERY That's true

DIANA How about this lemonade?

JUDY Come on.

[A ring at the door is heard]

Hullo, who's that? Oh, God, I hope it's not callers

MARGERY I said I wasn't at home to anybody to-day

PATRICK Fancy living in a place where people pay calls
This is the back of beyond all right

MARGERY Don't be so silly, Pat There are a lot of very intelligent people who live here, and it's a treat when they drop in for a chat over a cup of tea

[The front door is opened, and a voice is heard asking for MRS BATTLE]

DOROTHY Why, it's Alfred.

MARGERY Open the door, Judy *[As JUDY does this she calls]* Alfred!

ALFRED *[Outside]* Hullo, hullo, hullo

MARGERY Come in. Dorothy's here.

[ALFRED breezes in He is a tall, well set up, middle-aged man, with a red face and a hearty, blustering, jovial manner He laughs a great deal at everything he says]

ALFRED *[Taking MARGERY's hand]* Hullo, popsy-wopsy
[Seeing PATRICK] And look who's here When did you breeze in, old bean?

PATRICK *[Shaking hands with him]* I got back just before lunch

ALFRED Trust you for that And I bet you walloped into the fatted calf.

PATRICK *[With hauteur.]* I managed to swallow a morsel of cold chicken.

ALFRED And how does it feel to have left school for good, eh, young-feller-me-lad?

PATRICK Oh, all right

ALFRED Best days of your life, you know, old boy And when they're gone they're gone Can't put the clock back if you try till doomsday That's the way of the world Well, it's not a bad old place if you have a front seat and take care that no one diddles you out of it

TIMOTHY You do talk the most footling rot, Alfred

DOROTHY Tim, you mustn't be so rude to your father

ALFRED Let the little blighter say what he likes Respect be damned Tim and I are a couple of pals, aren't we, old boy?

TIMOTHY Rather I say, old cock, what about the hard court? You said you'd think about it

ALFRED It's a devil of a lot of money

TIMOTHY It's not as if you couldn't afford it Come on, old bean, be a sport

ALFRED [*Beaming*] Well, if you put it like that, I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll give it my favourable consideration

TIMOTHY Good.

ALFRED And how are you, Judy, old gal? Bit on the quiet side to-day, aren't you?

JUDY I don't think so.

ALFRED Love?

JUDY No

ALFRED When are you going to get married?

JUDY I'm not thinking of getting married

ALFRED And why not, if you please?

JUDY Well, for one reason nobody's asked me.

ALFRED What? Why, my little early-girlie has three proposals a week. Don't you, Dinah?

DIANA No, Alfred, I don't

ALFRED Don't you believe her I know And when I say I know, I know Paterfamilias But we can't have little Judy-pudy neglected [To TIMOTHY] Come along, young pie-face, you propose to her and then she can say she's turned down a blood

TIMOTHY I'm not going to take a chance, like that, Alfred

JUDY Owl

DOROTHY Why have you left your office so early, Alfred?

ALFRED A sudden desire to see my old Dolly-polly

DOROTHY Don't be funny, Alfred

ALFRED I can't help it, my dear I've tried, but it's no good It's my nature But, joking apart, as a matter of fact I came along to see Charlie

MARGERY He's not here He's in the city

ALFRED No, he isn't At least I can't get hold of him He hasn't been at his office all day

MARGERY That's funny

ALFRED No, it isn't To tell you the truth I'm just a teeny-weeny bit anxious

MARGERY [*Surprised*] Why?

ALFRED Hasn't he told you anything?

MARGERY No, what? Has something happened?

ALFRED I suppose he thought if it came out all right there was no use bothering you, and if it didn't you'd know quite soon enough

MARGERY But what is it?

ALFRED Perhaps I oughtn't to have said anything about it

PATRICK Father hasn't gone bust, Uncle Alfred?

ALFRED I think you kiddie-widdies had better go out into the garden. Dorothy, you stay

PATRICK If anything's the matter you may just as well tell us too Mummy will anyway, the moment you've gone

DIANA Come along, Tim We'll go Shout when you're through

[DIANA and TIMOTHY go out into the garden]

MARGERY This isn't another of your jokes, Alfred?

ALFRED I wish it were No, this is serious Did you happen to notice that a fellow called Tommy Avon shot himself last Friday?

MARGERY Yes Dreadful, wasn't it? We knew him We went to Ascot with him last year

PATRICK Who was Tommy Avon?

ALFRED He was very well known in the city He was one of your father's clients Good fellow and all that One of the best But I'm afraid he's let your governor down badly

MARGERY But I always thought Charles had such a high-class business He never went in for anything speculative

ALFRED That's why it's such tough luck on him I flatter myself I'm about as shrewd as they make 'em, and I wouldn't have hesitated to trust Tommy Avon with a million if I'd had it

JUDY But what's actually happened?

ALFRED You wouldn't understand if I told you But the long and short of it is that it's settling-day to-day, and if your father hasn't been able to get his pals to come to the rescue he'll be hammered

JUDY What does that mean?

ALFRED Ruin

MARGERY [*With a cry of dismay*] Oh! What shall we do?

DOROTHY Don't give way, Marge It's not certain yet

ALFRED Luckily for him he's got some very good friends Of course, his whole private fortune will have to go in

But if he's able to raise a substantial sum outside he can weather the storm

PATRICK Shall we have to leave this house and give up the car?

ALFRED I don't know about that If he pulls through I daresay it won't make much difference to his income He's got a very sound business and a very good reputation

PATRICK Oh, then things aren't as bad as all that

ALFRED Except that all his savings are gone down the drain

MARGERY Then if anything happened to him we'd be penniless?

PATRICK He's as strong as a horse, Mummy I was only telling Judy just now that I thought he'd probably live to a hundred He'll make another fortune all right

MARGERY But what does it depend on, his pulling through?

ALFRED Well, to put it shortly, it depends on whether Arthur Letter was willing to back him or not

PATRICK Who's Arthur Letter?

ALFRED He's the chairman of your father's bank He was to give your father his decision last night

MARGERY Oh, that's why he only got in just in time to dress for dinner. We were dining at the Savoy

ALFRED How did he seem?

MARGERY Just about as usual.

ALFRED He can't have been quite the same as usual At that moment it had just been decided whether he would have to file his petition in bankruptcy or could start with more or less of a clean slate.

MARGERY I didn't notice anything I was afraid we'd be late for dinner.

ALFRED How about this morning?

MARGERY I had breakfast in my room Judy and he had breakfast together

ALFRED Did he seem up or down?

JUDY To tell you the truth I didn't pay any attention I always read *The Mirror* at breakfast

ALFRED That's a wash-out then He had an appointment with me at ten, but he never kept it It was damned important too That's what puzzles me

JUDY He left here about half-past nine

MARGERY Do you mean to say he hasn't been at his office all day?

ALFRED No

PATRICK [*With a gasp*] I say . . .

[*The thought occurs to them simultaneously that CHARLES may have killed himself*]

MARGERY [*With agitation*] Oh, no, no, it's impossible He couldn't do anything so cruel to me

JUDY I wonder if he *was* rather strange this morning Oh, Uncle Alfred, it would be too awful if while we were eating kedgerees he was—he was making up his mind to——

MARGERY Judy, Judy. No. No He couldn't do anything so cowardly

PATRICK. D'you think it's possible, Uncle Alfred? I say, it would be rotten

ALFRED Well, old boy, I don't mind telling you that *was* in my mind when I got here I tried to be hearty like I always am, but between you and I and the gatepost it was a bit of an effort I daresay you noticed it Charlie's the most punctilious fellow I've never known him cut a date in my life.

MARGERY [*Becoming a trifle hysterical.*] No, no, no, no! I'm so frightened.

DOROTHY Darling, don't After all, there's no reason why you should believe the worst at once

MARGERY But why wasn't he at his office? On this day when it was so essential?

ALFRED If anything was to be saved from the wreck at all

DOROTHY Perhaps he was knocked down by a taxi and is lying unconscious in some hospital

MARGERY That wouldn't be much consolation either

PATRICK But can't we do something?

JUDY I think we ought to drag the Thames

PATRICK You fool, one can't drag the Thames

JUDY Well, we can drag the ponds on the Heath

MARGERY Oh, don't, don't He's so proud He's so sensitive I've got an awful fear that sooner than face us and tell us he's ruined he's

DOROTHY Don't say it, Marge It's so unlucky

PATRICK Oughtn't we to go to the police?

ALFRED Not yet We should look such fools if he suddenly turned up

DOROTHY I'm all for telephoning round to the hospitals

MARGERY We must do something I shall go mad

ALFRED If he doesn't turn up to-night, of course, we'll get in touch with the police-stations

PATRICK Couldn't we send out an S O S on the wireless? It's what people generally do when someone disappears

JUDY That wouldn't do much good if he's lying at the bottom of Whitestone Pond

MARGERY What a stigma on the children

DOROTHY Oh, darling, don't make things out worse than they are Alfred could always get the jury to bring in a verdict of temporarily insane

PATRICK Of course it may be that he's only lost his memory and he'll turn up somewhere in a few days.

JUDY Bournemouth That's where they're generally found

DOROTHY But, Alfred, why can't you ring up that man who was going to back him? Then we shall know if Charlie had any reason to do anything desperate or not

ALFRED Arthur Letter? It's not so easy as all that to get hold of the chairman of a great London bank I don't suppose he'd tell me anything if I did

DOROTHY Well, you can try

MARGERY Please, Alfred I'm so terribly anxious

ALFRED All right. I'll see if he'll speak to me He can't eat me

[He goes out]

MARGERY The suspense is too awful

PATRICK Did father go out in his top-hat this morning?

MARGERY Oh, Pat, don't be so silly This isn't the moment to think of top-hats

PATRICK I don't agree with you I particularly want to know

JUDY I think so I should have noticed it if he hadn't

PATRICK Then he can't have been meditating suicide when he left this house

MARGERY Why not?

PATRICK Mummy darling, no man in his senses would commit suicide in a top-hat

JUDY But if he was temporarily insane he wasn't in his senses

PATRICK Don't be idiotic, Judy What can you know about men? A chap who was going to commit suicide would naturally put on a cap or at the outside a bowler

MARGERY Oh, no, Pat, your father was always so particular He would never have gone out in a tail coat and a cap, whatever he was going to do Never Never

PATRICK That's what I say, if he went out in a toppler he hasn't committed suicide

JUDY I don't see why not Supposing he jumped in the river, he could always have left it on the tow-path

PATRICK And have people come along and say, Hullo, what's a bran-new toppler doing on the tow-path?

DOROTHY What is Alfred doing?

MARGERY Isn't it awful to think that only a few minutes ago we were all so happy We were talking of going down to the Riviera for the summer We hadn't a care in the world And now this terrible thing has happened

JUDY Life is like that

PATRICK Oh, God, you are a gloom, Judy If you haven't got anything cheerful to say, for God's sake shut up

JUDY I don't see any object in not facing facts I'm psychic I'm absolutely convinced that Daddy's lying at the bottom of Whitestone Pond

[ALFRED comes in]

ALFRED Well, boys and girls, it's all right Good news

MARGERY Alfred!

ALFRED I just mentioned my name, and they put me through to Sir Arthur at once I didn't give anything away. Trust your Uncle Alfred for that He told me he'd seen Charlie last night at his private house and in consideration of Charlie's personal character he'd agreed to let him have enough money to meet all his obligations

MARGERY Oh, my dear, how awfully nice of him

ALFRED When old Charlie-parlie left Sir Arthur's sumptuous mansion, he had a whacking fat cheque in his pocket

MARGERY What a relief!

DOROTHY But why hasn't he been at his office to-day?

ALFRED Oh, that's a minor point. I suppose he's been

tearing round and hadn't any time He'll tell us that when we see him The great thing is that he's weathered the storm

PATRICK Then we're not ruined after all?

ALFRED No Your father's taken a toss, but he's in the saddle again, and there's no reason why in a few years he shouldn't be where he was Of course, he'll have to work like blazes

JUDY Daddy loves work That's one thing

ALFRED He'll have to keep his nosy-posy to the grindstone

PATRICK Oh, well, there's no harm in that. At Daddy's age there's nothing much for a chap to do except work

MARGERY I used to be sorry that he had no outside interests, but as things have turned out, I daresay it's all for the best

ALFRED You kiddie-widdies mustn't be extravagant, you know. For some time your father won't have any spare cash to throw about

PATRICK I've thought of that I'm willing to do my bit We shall have to make do with the family bus for a bit longer, Judy old girl

JUDY It is sickening, isn't it? I suppose it can't be helped And we shan't be able to have a hard court either

MARGERY Call the others in, Judy There's no reason they should stay out any longer

JUDY All right [*At the window*] Dinah, Tim! Come in

MARGERY And then you'd better play tennis if you want to

JUDY After all this excitement I couldn't hit a ball

ALFRED Are you going to play tennis? I'll just nip over the garden wall and change I don't mind showing you young things that there's life in the old dog yet

[DIANA and TIMOTHY stroll in.

JUDY Oh, my dear, we've had such a thrill Daddy's vanished and we all thought he'd committed suicide And we were ruined and everything had to be sold, and now it's all right and Daddy hasn't committed suicide after all

DIANA If you were going to tell us all about it, it seems hardly worth while to have turned us out of the room

JUDY I didn't want you to go It was grand Mummy was in hysterics And Pat was keeping a stiff upper lip, and I was being the brave little woman

DIANA Do you mean to say it was all a false alarm?

TIMOTHY You know Alfred and his little jokes You oughtn't to let him get away with them. He only gets above himself

ALFRED Now then, young feller-me-lad, not so much of your lip We're not out of the blooming old wood yet

PATRICK We're ruined all right

JUDY But the only difference it'll make is that Pat can't have a car of his own, and we shall have to go on with the old court until Daddy makes some more money

TIMOTHY I say, that's a bit thick

PATRICK If they can play on grass at Wimbledon I suppose on a pinch we can too

ALFRED That's the spirit, old bean. I'm jolly glad to see that you're taking it like a sportsman.

DIANA And where's Uncle Charlie?

PATRICK We don't know that

MARGERY We wish we did We wish to God we did

JUDY We think he's lost his memory and is sitting on a bench at Bournemouth in a top-hat.

PATRICK. He's much more likely to be at Southend.

MARGERY Oh, no Even if your poor father had lost his memory it would never occur to him to go to Southend.

[The door is opened and CHARLES strolls amiably in He is a man in the early forties, quiet and of rather distinguished appearance, he is very neat in his black coat and grey striped trousers He wears a top-hat

MARGERY Charlie!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

SCENE II

The curtain rises All are present but CHARLES

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on a pinch we can too

ALFRED That's the spirit, old bean I'm jolly glad to see
that you're taking it like a sportsman

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bench at Bournemouth in a top-hat

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MARGERY Oh, no Even if your poor father had lost his
memory it would never occur to him to go to Southend

[The door is opened, and CHARLES strolls amiably in]

MARGERY Charlie!

CHARLES *[Taking off his hat]* Hullo

MARGERY *[Much agitated]* Where have you been? Oh,
we've been so anxious It's too bad of you

CHARLES What have I done?

MARGERY The suspense has been too awful

CHARLES *[Coolly]* Why, what's the matter? Hullo, Pat
Home for the holidays?

PATRICK Hullo, Daddy

CHARLES You look all right Had a nice time your last
term at school.

PATRICK Yes, grand

CHARLES How's everybody? Back from the city early, Alfred? Don't tell me you're idling

ALFRED I say, old boy, where the devil have you been? I've been trying to get hold of you all day long

CHARLES I? I've been for a walk on Hampstead Heath

ALFRED A walk?

MARGERY All day?

CHARLES No, I found rather a jolly little pub and had lunch there A cut off the joint and a bottle of beer Very nice

ALFRED Why didn't you go to your office?

JUDY We were sure you'd committed suicide

PATRICK Judy wanted to have Whitestone Pond dragged

MARGERY We've been so frightfully anxious, Charlie

CHARLES I may be very dense, but I don't quite understand what you're all talking about

ALFRED Well, old boy, I had to tell them You see, you didn't keep your appointment with me, and you hadn't turned up at the office

CHARLES Oh, I see [*Amiably*] Well, now you know, don't you?

PATRICK We know it's all right, Daddy

ALFRED They were all so upset they persuaded me to call up Arthur Letter He told me what he'd done.

CHARLES Sporting of him, wasn't it?

JUDY Were you absolutely broke, Daddy?

CHARLES I couldn't comply with my bargains.

JUDY What does that mean?

CHARLES Well, when a broker can't comply with his bargains he's hammered

ALFRED And then he can't trade any more

CHARLES How are you, Dorothy? You've got a new hat on

DOROTHY [*Alluringly*] D'you like it? How clever of you to notice

ALFRED Look here, Charlie, we must have a talk Tim, you and Dinah had better make yourselves scarce

TIMOTHY All right

PATRICK Sorry, old man I'm afraid tennis looks like being a wash-out

TIMOTHY Oh, that's all right I know what these domestic upsets are

PATRICK It's one of the penalties of having a family

CHARLES Why don't you and Dinah go and have a knock-up? Pat and Judy can join you presently

TIMOTHY I don't mind

CHARLES I shan't keep them long

TIMOTHY Oh, that's all right There's no hurry.

CHARLES [*With a tinge of irony*] Thanks

DIANA Come on, then

[*DIANA and TIMOTHY saunter out*]

DOROTHY Do you wish me to go, too?

MARGERY No, stay, Dorothy I've got a presentiment that something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

ALFRED My dear, I'm afraid that this is no time for culture

MARGERY I know That is why I want Dorothy to stay
There are moments when a woman wants another woman's support

ALFRED Where have you been all day, Charlie? I rang up every place I could think of

CHARLES I told you I've been for a walk on Hampstead Heath

ALFRED But you had an appointment to see me at ten.

CHARLES [*Smiling*] I can't tell you how excruciatingly the idea of seeing you at ten bored me.

ALFRED Thank you You made the appointment yourself

MARGERY What did you do on the Heath?

CHARLES I walked I thought I admired the scenery

ALFRED When every minute was of vital importance?

CHARLES That, too, added to the charm of the prospect

PATRICK I don't wish to cast a gloom on the party, but it sounds to me as though father were trying to be facetious

MARGERY Don't be silly, Pat You know your father isn't like that

ALFRED [*Shrewdly*] There's more in this than meets the eye I have no hesitation in saying that whatever

CHARLES It was a bad blow for me, you know, when Tommy Avon shot himself [*He makes this remark conversationally, with deliberation, but not as though he attached great importance to what he was saying*]

ALFRED It was the best thing he could do If he hadn't he'd have got fourteen years

CHARLES It cost me a packet

ALFRED And you're not the only one A lot of my clients have been hit Damned scoundrel

CHARLES I was proud of my firm I took a harmless vanity in the fact that my name stood so high on the Stock Exchange It was a source of a good deal of satisfaction to me to know that people pointed me out and said, Good fellow, Charlie Battle, safe as the Bank of England.

ALFRED That's why Arthur Letter was willing to help you when you were up against it Character is the best asset any man can have in the City

CHARLES When the crash came my first thought was to save the firm I was prepared to sacrifice every bob I had to keep my head above water. By George, there wasn't a stone I left unturned.

ALFRED You don't have to tell me that No one could have done more

CHARLES- And last night, at the eleventh hour, you might say, I did the trick I was saved I don't mind telling you it was a relief

ALFRED I'll bet it was

CHARLES You know, this is settling-day It had been a nightmare Last night I knew I could comply with my bargains All my savings had to go down the drain, but I didn't care a damn The old firm was saved and my reputation was all right Funny thing, honour, isn't it? And the importance we attach to it I suppose it's the force of habit

JUDY You've been rather wonderful, Daddy No one could have guessed anything particular was happening, could they, Mummy?

MARGERY No, dear, I never dreamt anything was wrong

CHARLES I'm glad of that I was afraid I'd been a trifle disagreeable

JUDY [*Quite pleasantly*] No, not more than usual

CHARLES I was in great spirits when I left the house this morning You'd have thought I'd made a fortune instead of lost one I walked to the tube as I've walked every morning, more or less since I was demobbed I nodded to one or two people I knew All going down to the City just as I was I got to the station There was the usual crowd hurrying in Suddenly my heart sank

JUDY Why?

CHARLES Well, my dear, you know, once or twice during these last days it looked as though I couldn't pull through And as I lay awake at night turning things over, I thought of what I'd do if I went broke I made pretty elaborate plans It relieved me I didn't see why

I shouldn't make the best of a bad job Well, I weathered the storm and I was in a position to start all over again I could go on quite quietly to the end of my life doing what I'd done every day for the last twelve years, going down to the City and studying the markets, buying and selling stock Suddenly it seemed to me that for me ruin meant life and liberty—and that tube, with all those people hurrying to catch their train, led to slavery and death So I went for a stroll on Hampstead Heath

MARGERY But, Charlie, my dear, that was only nerves I mean, that's the sort of thing we're all liable to since the war All of us who went through that awful experience bear its mark I know I do And I expect to bear it always

JUDY But, Mummy, you had the time of your life when you were working in your canteens

MARGERY Oh, Judy, how can you say anything so beastly? I was on my feet for hours on end I could never have stood it except that I was determined to do my bit

ALFRED You know, Judy old gal, you were only a baby You don't know what we went through during that terrible time, and, please God, you never will know

JUDY Well, I'll tell you what I think Except when you were actually under fire you had more fun than you've ever had before or since My belief is that if there was another war the greatest majority of you would just jump back into it with a whoop

ALFRED We answered the call when it came, and if it came again we'd answer it again

MARGERY But not with a whoop, darling With death in our hearts

ALFRED Do you realise how great a sacrifice we made then? And we made it for you

PATRICK For us?

ALFRED Yes, for you and Judy and Dinah and Tim For your generation

PATRICK You make me laugh Why, we're the sacrifice you made

JUDY And if you think we like it, Uncle Alfred, you're mistaken

ALFRED Well, upon my word You were only just born when it started I really can't see that it affected you much

PATRICK Don't you? Whichever way we turn it's there facing us It's been like a great weight round our necks all our lives We have the right to live like every other generation, and you've crabbed our pitch before we start

ALFRED But we didn't want the war It was forced on us

JUDY No, you didn't want the war You just muddled into it, and then you muddled through it, and then you muddled out of it You muddled your lives and you've muddled ours

MARGERY That's so ungrateful, Judy You've always had the best of everything I'm sure no one could have had better chances than you've had

PATRICK But you don't understand, Mother All our lives we've been surrounded by depression and anxiety, and, of course, it's had its effect on us You've sapped our vitality You've made a mess of the world and you've taken away our power to put it right

JUDY If a man can't get a job, it's the war If he's slack and incompetent, it's the war If he forges a cheque or commits bigamy, it's the war If the roads are bad and the trains rotten, it's the war If we're crippled with debts and taxes, it's the war

ALFRED Everyone knows it left behind it a long train of problems and difficulties We've got to face that.

JUDY But why should *we*? Why should we suffer for your stupidity?

CHARLES You know, there's some truth in what the child says about the war. We weren't always frightened, we weren't always cold, we weren't always hungry. There were times when it was no end of a lark.

ALFRED To me it was unmitigated horror.

CHARLES Oh, come off it. We talk a lot of bunk to the younger generation in order to show them what stern stuff we're made of, but, damn their eyes, they don't believe us. Let's face it. You loved being a temporary gent. A good deal of authority and no responsibility to speak of. There were long periods when one could be thoroughly idle without one's conscience reproaching one. And there was a lot of excitement. All I got out of the war was pneumonia, a wound in the hip, a cracked skull and a temporary captaincy. But it's an experience I wouldn't have missed.

MARGERY It's a miracle that you returned at all.

JUDY Wasn't it an awful let-down when you came back, Daddy?

CHARLES You know, I got a lot of fun out of thinking I was alive. I was thirty. I said to myself, Well, I've lost the five best years of my youth, but it's no good grouching, let me make the best of what remains. That was twelve years ago. And now my youth has gone.

ALFRED No one can say you haven't made good use of it. Like a great many others at the end of the war you had to start again at the beginning. You haven't done so badly. You've had a nice house and a car and you've kept your wife in the sort of way your position required. You've sent your children to first-rate schools. You had saved a bit of money.

CHARLES Fifty thousand pounds, roughly.

ALFRED It's true that through no fault of your own that's gone, but all the rest remains. You've still got your position and you can make more money. I don't think you've got much to complain of.

CHARLES [*Reflectively*] Of course, it's not out of his solid clients that a broker makes his money. He makes it out of the speculator. Whether he's a gambler who wants a flutter for the excitement of it, or a fool who thinks he can make money without working for it, the result is always the same. It's only a question of time before the whole of his money finds its way into the broker's pocket.

ALFRED That's the speculator's look-out.

CHARLES Of course. But sometimes I couldn't help asking myself if it was to spend my life so tamely that I'd escaped death a score of times by a hair's-breadth.

PATRICK I shouldn't have thought it was tame.

CHARLES You've never been in the Stock Exchange, have you? Pity I didn't take you in one day. It would have interested you.

JUDY I thought strangers couldn't get in.

CHARLES No, they're not allowed, and if they're caught they must expect to be hustled a bit. They'll probably want a new hat.

ALFRED You could have smuggled him in as one of your clerks. No one would have taken any notice of him. It's an amazing sight.

CHARLES It's indescribable. There's a hell of a row, you know.

ALFRED Deafening.

CHARLES Everyone's yelling at the top of his voice, and men are rushing about like mad. I must say, at first there's something rather exhilarating about it. That frantic activity does give you a thrilling sensation of life.

ALFRED By Jove, it does

CHARLES You've never heard a man hammered, have you, Alfred?

ALFRED No, I haven't

CHARLES It's impressive At three o'clock, for instance, as the hour strikes [*The clock in the drawing-room strikes three*] Just as that clock is striking now, the two waiters appear on the stands and take off their hats, as if to a corpse. They beat with a wooden mallet three times. Fellows look up and that deafening row stops. Suddenly, as though it had been cut with a knife. And it's so still you really could hear a pin drop. However often you've heard it, the sound of that mallet ringing through the deathly silence is frightening. The waiter at the Consol Market end reads out a notice, and the waiter at the Mining Market end repeats it "Gentlemen, Mr Charles Laurence Battle, trading as Wargrave, Battle & Co, is unable to comply with his bargains." They read in a loud, hoarse voice, without any expression in it, they've read the same sort of things so often, and then they shuffle off the stands. There's a moment's pause, and however hardened you are, there's something tragic in it. They're good fellows on the Stock Exchange most of them, and a bit sentimental, and it gives one a pang to think someone's beaten. It may have been just bad luck. It may have been that one bit off more than one could chew. If you're up, you can afford to be sorry for the man who's down, and if you're shaky, you wonder if it'll be your turn next. Yes, just for a moment dismay fills every heart, and then, before you can say Jack Robinson, as suddenly as the row stopped, the row begins again. Pandemonium. Charles Laurence Battle, trading as Wargrave, Battle & Co, is forgotten. The world has passed him by.

[*Suddenly there is a ring on the telephone in the hall.*]

MARGERY See who it is, Judy

CHARLES If it's anyone for me I'm not at home Never mind how urgent.

JUDY: All right.

[She goes out]

ALFRED Well, old boy, I'm glad you've escaped that It's true you've lost a packet, but you'll make it again While there's life there's hope

DOROTHY Have you been terribly anxious all these days, Charlie?

CHARLES I have a bit

MARGERY Why didn't you tell me?

CHARLES Oh, my dear, there didn't seem any object in worrying you

[JUDY comes in again]

JUDY It's Mr Turner He wants awfully to speak to you, Daddy, and when I said you were out he seemed all fussed and bothered

CHARLES That's nice of him I hope you lied like my own daughter

JUDY He asked me if I knew where he could get hold of Uncle Alfred, and I told him he was here He's holding the line.

ALFRED I wonder what he wants me for?

DOROTHY You'd better go and see, Alfred

[ALFRED gets up and goes out.]

MARGERY Will this interfere with our summer holiday, Charlie?

DOROTHY Marge and I were thinking it would be so good for the children if we went down to the Riviera for a change

MARGERY I like the river, but I do realise that it would be

much more of an education for them to take them to France And everyone's going to Antibes now

JUDY Oh, Mummy, that would be too divine And Tim and Dinah too?

DOROTHY Well, I haven't spoken to Alfred about it yet Your mother and I have been putting our heads together

MARGERY Of course, before all this happened

DOROTHY [*To Judy*] I suppose your father couldn't get away, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind your going We'd go to some cheap pension, and really I don't suppose it would be any more expensive than staying in England

MARGERY Naturally we'd have to be frightfully economical

JUDY Oh, Daddy, do say yes It would be awful fun Wouldn't it, Pat?

PATRICK Not so dusty.

[ALFRED, *distraught, bursts into the room*

ALFRED Charlie, he says you're hammered

CHARLES [*Coolly*] Well, what of it?

ALFRED He's frightfully upset He said he understood everything had been arranged Charlie, it's not true, is it?

CHARLES [*Sardonically*] Yes, my boy, the waiter went knocky-knocky with his little mallet and poor old Charlie-parlie was blown sky high

ALFRED It's not true, Charlie You don't know what you're saying For God's sake pull yourself together, old bean

MARGERY Oh, Charlie, what has happened?

ALFRED [*Emphatically*] What do you mean, Charlie?

CHARLES Only that at the very moment that I was so dramatically describing to you what happens when a man is hammered on the Stock Exchange, I was actually

being hammered Don't you remember, I called your attention to the clock striking three?

PATRICK I hate these cheap theatrical effects

CHARLES I have a simple mind They get me every time

JUDY If one didn't know Daddy had no sense of humour one would think he'd just been pulling our leg

CHARLES You see, as three o'clock approached and I knew what was going to happen, I felt a trifle lonely on Hampstead Heath I suddenly craved for the society of my fellows

MARGERY I can't believe it It's so fantastic

CHARLES They say that when the dying buffalo feels his end approaching, he leaves his herd and retires into solitude In that respect I am unlike the dying buffalo

ALFRED It's not often I'm puzzled But I am now, and I don't mind admitting it You could have complied with your bargains perfectly well

CHARLES I didn't choose to

ALFRED You had Arthur Letter's cheque in your pocket

CHARLES I have it still. [*He takes a cheque out of his pocket and hands it to ALFRED*] Perhaps you wouldn't mind sending it back to him and telling him that I made up my mind not to avail myself of his kindness

ALFRED There's more in this than meets the eye I have no hesitation in saying that

MARGERY But then we're ruined

DOROTHY Oh, Margery, how awfull

ALFRED You cut along, Dorothy

DOROTHY All right [*To MARGERY*] I'll be in the garden in case you want me, dear.

MARGERY All right, dear

[*DOROTHY goes out.*]

JUDY D'you want us to go, Uncle Alfred?

CHARLES Oh, I think you'd better stay I have one or two things to say that a good deal concern you

PATRICK But if you're hammered we're in the soup, Daddy

CHARLES Up to the neck, my boy

PATRICK I don't know what there is to be so damned cheerful about.

ALFRED Neither do I, believe me Your father has let himself be hammered when he actually had in his pocket the means of saving himself

PATRICK But what's the big idea?

ALFRED Of course, he'd had a knock But he isn't the only one Why, I know brokers who've made and lost half a dozen fortunes in their time On the Stock Exchange you have to take the rough with the smooth

PATRICK That's when a fellow shows his grit, when he's down and out

CHARLES [*With a smile in his eyes*] True, my son You're presently going to have an opportunity of showing yours

ALFRED But how did you have the heart to let an old-established business like yours go to blazes?

CHARLES I steel'd it I don't deny that when the clock struck three just now it gave me a funny little feeling in the pit of my stomach

MARGERY Your poor father was so proud of the business, Charlie He always said there wasn't a more respectable firm in the city of London

ALFRED What are you going to do now?

CHARLES [*Casually*] I'm going abroad

MARGERY [*In sudden agitation*] Charlie, you haven't done anything dreadful? They're not going to issue a warrant?

CHARLES No, no, my dear However dishonourable my

conduct may be, I have done nothing that the law can take exception to

MARGERY [Helplessly] One never knows with brokers. It's such a funny profession

ALFRED My God, this is a pretty kettle of fish For goodness' sake, explain yourself, Charlie A man doesn't commit suicide for fun

CHARLES The explanation is very simple This morning I came to the conclusion that it wasn't worth it

ALFRED What?

CHARLES This life I've been leading For twelve mortal years I've been going down to the City in the same tube, I've spent the day buying and selling shares, for twelve mortal years I've come home every evening in the same tube And the world was rolling on and on I'm fed up Fed to the teeth I'm not going to be the drudge of respectability any longer I'm through Look [*He takes his glistening topper*] Here is the badge of my office This is the symbol of my position and my respectability Sleek, shining, new and rakish Look at it It represents the potentiality of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice To hell with it [*He flings it down on the floor, stamps on it and kicks it away from him*]

MARGERY Charlie, Charlie, Charlie And you who were always so particular about your hats. Oh, what is going to become of us now?

PATRICK Are you obliged to be so melodramatic, father?

CHARLES In moments of emotion we're all apt to fall into it, my dear boy.

JUDY And what about us, Daddy?

CHARLES I'm going to leave you.

PATRICK. How long for?

CHARLES For good.

PATRICK. [*With the utmost surprise*] Why?

CHARLES [*Very naturally*] Because I'm bored with you

PATRICK Bored with us? Bored with me and Judy?

CHARLES Yes, bored with you and Judy Aren't you bored with me?

PATRICK That's different You're our father

CHARLES How is it different?

PATRICK People are always rather bored with their parents.
That's human nature

CHARLES Is it?

PATRICK After all, they belong to a different generation.
The middle-aged are naturally tedious

CHARLES [*Smiling*] Has it never struck you that the middle-aged find the young tedious too?

PATRICK It certainly hasn't

CHARLES They do

PATRICK But why? They're not tedious

CHARLES Oh, aren't they?

PATRICK How can they be? They've got youth and high spirits. They're brimming over with ideas Aren't they, Mummy?

MARGERY Yes, darling, of course

PATRICK It's absurd to say that Judy and I are boring
What would this house be without us? A mausoleum
At meals we're the life and soul of the party Aren't we, Judy?

JUDY Rather

PATRICK. Ask anyone you like and they'll all tell you the same thing. We've got the reputation all over the place for being unusually brilliant. If you find us boring it can only be on account of your own stupidity

MARGERY Oh, that is rude, Pat. You shouldn't talk to your father like that

PATRICK He asked for it, and, damn it all, what other explanation is there?

MARGERY I don't know, darling

PATRICK It's so ungrateful

CHARLES I don't suppose you're more boring than most young things of your age I daresay it's only because I know you better that you bore me more

PATRICK But isn't youth enough in itself? You can't be so unintelligent as not to realise that nowadays the only thing that counts is youth And it's because we've discovered that, that our generation is so much ahead of every other You know what I mean, Judy, don't you?

JUDY Of course I do In Daddy's time when they were young they just wanted to be older

PATRICK That's right And we don't We're young and we want to enjoy our youth For the first time in the world's history we've realised the immense value of it

MARGERY Of course, it's lovely to be young

PATRICK Your lives would be nothing without us Think of the exhilaration we bring and the vitality and go I mean, to say we're boring is perfectly outrageous I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but I can honestly say that's the last thing anyone could call Judy, and I think I can safely say that she'd say the same about me

JUDY Absolutely

CHARLES [*Amiably*] I wonder if it has ever occurred to you how tiresome the conversation of the young is to the middle-aged Chatter, chatter, chatter about nothing at all Just to hear yourselves speak And you take yourselves with such appalling seriousness You know nothing, and you haven't the sense to hold your tongues You utter the most obvious commonplace with the air of having made a world-shaking discovery You're so

solemn You're so self-satisfied You're so dogmatic
You're inane The only excuse for you is that you're
very young One tries to have patience with you But,
my God, don't think we find you amusing We find
you quite incredibly dull

[JUDY gives a smothered chuckle]

PATRICK Shut up, Judy This is no laughing matter I
can tell you this, Daddy, this is the last time I take any
trouble to be gay and jolly and amusing in this house
God knows, it's been an uphill job, but I've done my
best I've just sweated my guts out But now I'm
through, definitely and absolutely through

JUDY But have you no affection for us, Daddy?

CHARLES No, I haven't

MARGERY Oh, Charlie, what a cruel thing to say How can
you help loving your children?

CHARLES I rather liked them when they were kids, but now
they're grown up I don't find them very interesting

PATRICK [*Outraged*] But that's simply unnatural

CHARLES D'you think it is? I don't Of course, when they're
small one's fond of one's children One likes them as
one likes puppies or kittens They're dependent on you,
and that's rather touching They think you're very
marvellous, and that's rather flattering But almost
before you know where you are, they're young men and
women with characters of their own They're not part
of you any more They're individuals They're strangers
Why should you care for them?

PATRICK Do you mean to say that Judy and I mean no
more to you than if we were puppies or kittens?

CHARLES No, I mean that you don't mean very much more
to me than puppies mean to their father when they're
grown into fine healthy young dogs

JUDY But you'd be sorry if we died, Daddy?

CHARLES Wretched I've been frightfully worried when either of you has been ill I was devoted to you then Perhaps it's unfortunate that on the whole you've both had robust health

PATRICK You can hardly expect us to have a series of illnesses just to excite your parental affection

CHARLES You're right, Pat I should certainly congratulate myself on the excellent physique I was able to endow you with

PATRICK I should have thought you'd be so proud of us I've always been in the first five in all my forms, and I was head of my house I was captain of the first eleven, and in the first fifteen Any unprejudiced person would say I was rather a credit to you

CHARLES You know, to be proud of one's children is really and truly only to be proud of oneself I'm not a vain man

PATRICK Well, I'm dished

CHARLES Do you care very much for me, Pat?

MARGERY Of course he does, Charlie I've never known two more affectionate children

CHARLES Let him answer for himself.

PATRICK I don't know what you mean I like you as a chap naturally likes his father You're not going about it exactly the right way to make me crazy about you

CHARLES I suppose if I died you'd cry a bit That would be nice of you and very proper But I'm all alive and kicking Don't you find me rather a nuisance? Don't you resent having to come to me for money, and my wanting to know how you're going to spend it?

PATRICK. Well, naturally, any fellow of my age wants to be his own master

CHARLES Hasn't it ever struck you that it would be grand to have a flat of your own?

PATRICK I don't see what that's got to do with it.

CHARLES It doesn't suggest that you find the family circle precisely thrilling

PATRICK But you can't alter the facts of life It's human nature that parents should be frightfully fond of their children But they can't expect their children to be frightfully fond of them

MARGERY Oh, Pat

PATRICK Well, ask Uncle Alfred He's a man of the world He doesn't expect Tim and Dinah to be as keen on him as he is on them.

ALFRED There you're very much mistaken, young feller-me-lad I flatter myself that there's nowhere in this country a more united family than ours But then I admit my kiddie-widdies weren't brought up as you were Dorothy and I have made friends of our children That's why we've always made them call us by our first names Our family life is just a grand lark You know how we chaff one another They look upon me as their great big brother. Why, they just roar with laughter at my jokes

[PATRICK and JUDY exchange a look

CHARLES I've come to the conclusion that such clever and intelligent children as you are can get along quite comfortably without me And as that suits my convenience, I'm going to give you the opportunity of doing so

PATRICK But how are we to live? It means that Judy will just have to go on the streets

JUDY Don't be so silly, Pat You boys are so ignorant

PATRICK Well, if father leaves us without a bob, there's nothing else you can do

JUDY Don't you know that since the war the amateurs have entirely driven the professionals out of business? No girl can make a decent living now by prostitution

MARGERY Judy, Judy, what are you talking about? Really, a girl of your age I don't know what the world is coming to

PATRICK How am I to go up to Cambridge and read for the Bar?

CHARLES Are you still proposing to enter Parliament in the Labour interest?

PATRICK That's the idea ultimately, of course

CHARLES Don't you think the Labour Party are beginning to fight a trifle shy of the people like you, who only joined them when it looked like a good thing, and now grab all the plums?

PATRICK They want people of our class

CHARLES Have you ever reflected upon St Paul? He was a tent-maker, you know He got a lot of kudos out of it

PATRICK Damn it all, Father, we're talking seriously now, don't bring in religion

CHARLES You know, I believe it would pay you to become a working man A stoker, for instance, or a dustman

PATRICK Me?

CHARLES Get to know the proletariat from the inside, my dear boy, and when you're all fighting for the spoils of office you'll have the bulge over the Eton boy and the Oxford graduate

ALFRED You're talking through your hat, Charlie It's just when children are growing up and entering the world that they need a father's guidance You can't leave them in the lurch like that

CHARLES Oh, can't I? You wait and see

ALFRED Penniless?

CHARLES No, not exactly penniless That would require more fortitude than I possess.

PATRICK But haven't you lost everything?

MARGERY Most brokers have something tucked away somewhere, Pat, that their creditors can't get at

CHARLES I'm afraid I haven't Until to-day I've been what I can only describe as the soul of honour

PATRICK Well, then, you haven't a bob

CHARLES In order to comply with my bargains, I should have had to throw into the hole my private fortune But I'm hammered I happen to have twenty thousand pounds worth of bonds in a New York bank

PATRICK Oh!

CHARLES I must tell you that in honour I should hand it over to my creditors They have a moral right to it

ALFRED I'm afraid they have

CHARLES You see, my solicitor agrees with me There is no doubt in my mind that to keep it is a most ungentlemanly proceeding I propose, however, to do so

ALFRED Oh, Charlie, you can't.

CHARLES Legally?

ALFRED Legally, of course you can But not morally I mean, it would be frightfully bad form Your friends will think you a dirty dog

CHARLES And with justice But after mature reflection I've come to the conclusion that that won't impair my appetite or disturb my night's rest

[JUDY again gives a little laugh]

MARGERY Don't giggle, Judy This is frightfully serious Your father's honour is at stake

CHARLES There are two courses open to me The twenty thousand pounds I've saved from the wreck will bring in roughly about a thousand a year I can keep that for myself, and subsist modestly on the income But I think it would be rather selfish

MARGERY My poor children They can't beg their bread in the streets of London

CHARLES I have a very sensitive conscience, and I'm not quite sure that I should be entirely happy if at moments the thought crossed my mind that my wife and children were in want

[MARGERY gives a start and looks at him with perplexity and consternation]

MARGERY But Charlie . . .

CHARLES [Interrupting her] The other course is to hand the entire amount to them and go out into the world alone and destitute The gesture would be romantic, but to my mind absurd I propose, therefore, to leave you fifteen thousand pounds and keep five thousand for myself The income from that will always prevent me from starving

MARGERY But aren't I to come with you?

CHARLES Oh, no, dear, that would be an awful bore for you

MARGERY [Gasping] Oh! It never occurred to me for a moment you meant that

CHARLES Didn't it? I thought I made it quite clear

MARGERY It never dawned on me Was it clear to you, Alfred?

ALFRED Don't ask me, Margery I don't know if I'm standing on my head or my heels.

MARGERY But I don't understand It's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard in my life You can't tell your wife that you're going to leave her just like that, in the course of conversation. Without a row or a scene or anything Like a chauffeur giving notice because he wants to better himself.

CHARLES No, not like that Like an old family retainer

breaking it gently to his employers that advancing years oblige him to take a well-earned rest

MARGERY Oh, it's absurd You've got no reason to leave me and the children.

CHARLES I've been a husband and a father long enough I think one should always abandon an occupation when it has ceased to be a source of pleasure and profit

MARGERY But do I bore you, Charlie?

CHARLES A bit No, that's a lie. To extinction

MARGERY He's not sane, Alfred

ALFRED Well, that's what I've been thinking myself My belief is, Charlie, that you're completely potty

CHARLES Don't you think I'd know if I were?

MARGERY Even their nearest and dearest don't know sometimes Thank God, it's never been in my family [*A ring on the telephone is heard*] Oh, bother!

CHARLES See who it is, Pat If it's anyone for me I'm out
[*PATRICK goes without a word*]

MARGERY I thought you meant me to come with you I thought your idea was that we should settle down in some place in France or Italy where we could live cheaply and play golf

CHARLES You'd have hated that, Margery

MARGERY I shouldn't have liked it, but I *am* your wife and if I'd really thought it my duty I'd have consented And, of course, we might have got to know some very nice people

CHARLES I would never dream of asking you to make such a sacrifice

[*PATRICK comes in*]

PATRICK It's Mr Turner. I told him you were here, and he's holding on.

CHARLES Oh, damn!

[He goes out quickly]

MARGERY Oh, Alfred, what shall we do?

ALFRED Well, my dear, I think you'd better let me have a talk to Charles alone I'm used to dealing with matters of this sort, and my experience is that it's much better for a friend of both parties to step in before anything irreparable is said on either side

MARGERY I'm so flabbergasted, Alfred I mean, it's so strange that Charlie should turn after all these years

JUDY Come on, Mummy If Uncle Alfred wants us to get out we'd better nip before Daddy comes back

ALFRED I'm sure it's wiser I can find out exactly how the land lies

MARGERY If he'd made a point of my going with him I should have said to him, Charlie, I am not only a wife, but a mother I cannot leave my children And if you feel that I mean nothing to you any more, then you must go And we might have arranged an amicable separation But if he doesn't want me, the situation is entirely different

ALFRED At the first glance I don't quite see how

MARGERY It's obvious I won't let myself be treated like that for a moment I have my woman's dignity to think of

ALFRED Oh, yes, of course I'd forgotten that Now you popoffski, my dear

MARGERY Very well

PATRICK Of course, I think he's off his chump I mean, to say that we're dull, why it doesn't begin to have any sense

MARGERY I wonder if it would be wise to send for a doctor

[To JUDY] Give me your father's hat, darling

JUDY *[Picking it up]* Here you are

MARGERY [*Pressing it to her bosom*] It's like a poor little baby brutally done to death It reminds me of those Armenian folk-songs

[*They go out, leaving ALFRED alone CHARLES re-enters*

CHARLES Hullo, where are the others?

ALFRED I packed them off I wanted to have a word with you alone

CHARLES That was Bertie Turner on the 'phone

ALFRED What did he want?

CHARLES [*With a little smile*] H'm Good chap He and some of the lads have got together and they've offered to put up all the money to settle so that I can get back into the House

ALFRED By jingol

CHARLES J C was a good judge of character, wasn't he? It's so much harder to resist kindness than brute force

ALFRED [*Eagerly*] Have you accepted?

CHARLES No, I couldn't But I was so shaken I had to be a bit short with him I told him to mind his own damned business and rang off

ALFRED Oh, Charlie, how could you be such a damned fool?

CHARLES Don't nag me now, Alfred I'm a bit shattered

ALFRED I'm not going to nag you, old boy But now that we're alone, let's get down to brass tacks Gloves off and cards on the table, and all that sort of thing What's the little game?

CHARLES [*Recovering himself*] I wonder what you're talking about now, Alfred?

ALFRED [*Very hearty*] Go on with you, Charlie Now you tell your Uncle Alfred the truth There's a woman in this Deny it if you can.

CHARLES I do

ALFRED You can't throw dust in Uncle Alfred's eyes like that Uncle Alfred wasn't born yesterday If you've let your business go to old billy-o and you're leaving your wife and family, it's for a woman or I'll eat my hat

CHARLES [*Good-naturedly*] Eat it then.

ALFRED Oh, come off it You can trust an old friend. I'm a man of the world I know you've been married nineteen years A chap wants a change now and then I'm not going to blame you if you've got stuck on a little bit Have your fun if you want to Life is short and we're dead a long time But be reasonable about it One doesn't break up a happy home for a little bit of fluff I mean Well, you know what I mean The game isn't worth the candle Don't do it, old boy, don't do it

CHARLES My dear Alfred, you know more about little bits of fluff than I do

ALFRED [*Archly*] My business brings me in contact with them now and then And I'm human But I never let them interfere with my home life No, sir

CHARLES Have you ever met a little bit of fluff who was prepared to share the life of a middle-aged man with two hundred and fifty pounds a year?

ALFRED I wondered at the time if Margery hadn't hit the nail on the head when she hinted that you had a tidy little sum tucked away somewhere.

CHARLES Not a bob

ALFRED Do you mean to tell me that you expect to live on five quid a week?

CHARLES It's enough to provide me with the necessities of existence The good thing about luxury is that when you've had it, you can so very easily do without it If I'd never had a car I should always have hankered after

one I've had one for twenty years, and now I'm perfectly willing to walk on my flat feet. But I don't want to waste my time on work whose only object is to keep body and soul together.

ALFRED Well, if you're not going off with a woman I'm blowed if I see why you are going off?

CHARLES I'm not prepared to waste the rest of my life doing things that bore me for people in whom I take no interest. I hanker after my own company. You see, I think I've done all that I'm called upon to do for those dependent on me. I want the future for myself.

ALFRED What are you going to do with it?

CHARLES I haven't a notion. I'm going to see.

ALFRED You must have some idea at the back of your head.

CHARLES I have only one life. When I look back and think of all the fellows who were killed in the war, I think I'd like to make more use of it than just buy and sell shares and make or lose a fortune.

ALFRED Oh, my dear boy, you're just talking through your hat. We hear a lot about women leading their own lives. I think it's all tommy-rot myself, but there it is, and we've got to put up with it. But whoever heard of a man leading his own life? It's not done.

CHARLES Don't you think it's rather a pretty compliment we pay the other sex if we sometimes take a leaf out of their book?

ALFRED. Do you think I don't get a bit restless sometimes? Dorothy's the best woman in the world, but now and again she's rather tiresome. Women are, you know. And sometimes on Monday morning I don't much want to go down to the office. But I say to myself, now then, Algy-palgy, this won't do, you know, shoulder to the wheel, old boy.

CHARLES And your reward is the esteem of your wife and the respect of your fellow-citizens

ALFRED What do you suppose would happen to society if everybody behaved like you? I mean, it would be the end of progress and civilisation and the whole bag of tricks

CHARLES I think it's very silly to say that you should only do the things that you think everyone else should do. The great majority are quite content to travel in the same old rut from the cradle to the grave. Well, let them. I don't blame them.

ALFRED It's such madness to change your whole way of life and break up your home on a moment's impulse. You've only thought about it for a few hours.

CHARLES I've only thought about it for a few hours with my head. I've thought about it for twelve years with my belly.

ALFRED You'll regret it. You'll never stop regretting it.

CHARLES One has to take that risk. Who'd marry if he was afraid he'd regret it later? What is life, old boy, but a leap in the dark?

ALFRED You'll never be happy, you know.

CHARLES I don't see why not. I have a capacity for enjoyment, a placid disposition and an absence of wants.

[DOROTHY comes to the garden window and looks in]

DOROTHY I'm sorry to interrupt you. Margery wants to know what is happening.

CHARLES Come in. Alfred and I have been having a little chat, but we've finished.

ALFRED Has Margery told you?

DOROTHY Yes. Can she come now?

CHARLES I shall be ready in a few minutes. I'm just going upstairs to change and pack.

DOROTHY [*Taken aback*] You're not going now?

CHARLES Yes When you've made up your mind to do a thing it's only a waste of time not to do it quickly

ALFRED But you can't go to-day, Charlie

CHARLES Why not? I'm only taking a handbag

ALFRED Your affairs are in a god-awful mess There are a thousand things to arrange

CHARLES Nothing that I can't leave in your hands, Alfred
You're a highly competent solicitor

ALFRED It looks so damned fishy, your running away like this I mean, there's sure to be a bit of a rumpus It's only decent for you to stay and face the music

CHARLES [*Gaily*] I don't agree with you at all I think it's much more elegant to slip out quietly through the artists' entrance

[CHARLES goes quickly and

THE CURTAIN FALLS

SCENE III

When the curtain rises CHARLES, ALFRED and DOROTHY are discovered

ALFRED But you can't go to-day, Charlie

CHARLES Why not? I'm only taking a handbag

ALFRED Your affairs are in a god-awful mess There are a thousand things to arrange

CHARLES Nothing that I can't leave in your hands, Alfred
You're a highly competent solicitor

ALFRED It looks so damned fishy, your running away like this I mean, there's bound to be a bit of a rumpus
It's only decent for you to stay and face the music

CHARLES [*Gaily*] I don't agree with you at all I think it's much more elegant to slip out through the artists' entrance

[CHARLES goes out quickly]

DOROTHY Can you make head or tail of it, Alfred?

ALFRED I think I know a thing or two about human nature, and I'm convinced there's a woman in it

DOROTHY [*With a quick look at him*] Have you told him that?

ALFRED Yes He denies it

DOROTHY [*Smiling a little*] Of course, he'd do that

ALFRED How have he and Margery been getting on lately?

DOROTHY Oh, all right, like they always have Of course, she had her own interests and he was in the City all day. I shouldn't call either of them very passionate people.

ALFRED Well, just the ordinary typical married couple, I suppose I don't see that either of them had anything to complain of

DOROTHY I shouldn't have thought so.

ALFRED Has he been going about with anybody?

DOROTHY I haven't heard of it.

ALFRED You'd better ask Margery If a man's in love with somebody else, his wife generally has some suspicion

DOROTHY I'm sure if she had, she'd have told me. We tell one another everything

ALFRED If a fellow is prepared to chuck everything, his business and his family and the whole bag of tricks, it must be for some reason

DOROTHY Oh, yes, I don't suppose he'd do it just for fun

ALFRED I've been a solicitor for a good many years, and my experience is that there are only two things that matter to a normal man One's money, and the other's women

DOROTHY If anyone knows, you ought to, Alfred

ALFRED Well, I mean, what else is there?

DOROTHY You don't think he might have some spiritual motive, if you know what I mean?

ALFRED Of course, there's a possibility of that He may not be quite right in his head

DOROTHY I didn't mean that exactly I was wondering if he isn't doing this on account of some ideal

ALFRED Come off it, popsy-wopsy You've been reading too many novels, business men don't do things for an ideal

DOROTHY He's never been quite normal since the war

ALFRED He's a thundering good chap, and I hate to see him make a damned fool of himself

DOROTHY Well, what's to be done?

ALFRED I think the only person who can do anything is
Margery Pity she isn't a bit more intelligent

DOROTHY It's not easy for a woman to be intelligent with
a man who isn't in love with her

ALFRED Charlie's an emotional fellow, and, hang it all,
she's a woman She ought to be able to get round him
somehow

DOROTHY Five o'clock in the afternoon isn't a very good
time for emotion

ALFRED If you'd been mixed up in as many divorce cases
as I have you wouldn't say that Look here, you have
a talk to her You can give her a lead I'll go along and
send her in It's a bit awkward for me

DOROTHY I'll do what I can

ALFRED I know you will, old gal

[ALFRED goes out DIANA comes in]

DIANA Hullo, Dorothy! Are you alone?

DOROTHY Is there anything you want?

DIANA I was looking for Uncle Charlie

DOROTHY Why?

DIANA I just wanted to say good-bye to him

DOROTHY Oh, are you going?

DIANA No, but I thought he was

DOROTHY Run along, darling, I'm busy If there's anything
to tell, I'll tell you later

[MARGERY comes in quickly, and with her first words
DIANA slips out]

MARGERY Alfred says you've got something to say to me

DOROTHY He thought I'd better speak to you before you
saw Charlie

MARGERY Where is Charlie?

DOROTHY Upstairs He's packing.

MARGERY [*Dumbfounded*] Packing? He isn't really going?

DOROTHY I'm afraid so

MARGERY To-day?

DOROTHY Now

MARGERY [*With a gasp*] Oh! I never thought for a moment that he meant it I thought he was hysterical and just making a scene

DOROTHY Don't take it too tragically, darling He'll come back

MARGERY What to? He won't have any business We shan't have anything to live on

DOROTHY Had you no suspicion that anything was wrong?

MARGERY With the business? No, he never talked to me about it He knew I hated shop

DOROTHY No, I meant at home

MARGERY No, he always seemed just the same I never paid much attention to him Why should I?

DOROTHY That's true

MARGERY I think it's so frightfully selfish of him If a man's lost his money, it's his duty to work hard and make some more

DOROTHY D'you think he's in love with someone else?

MARGERY Oh, no, I should have noticed that at once I gave him everything he wanted in that way

DOROTHY That's wasn't very much, was it?

MARGERY We were very good friends We didn't interfere with one another I should have called it an ideal marriage

DOROTHY Men are very funny You never really know what they want I don't believe they know themselves

MARGERY What do you mean by that?

DOROTHY Well, I always had an idea that Charlie hankered after something different

MARGERY I don't know what I've been a perfect wife

DOROTHY Perhaps you didn't bring enough beauty into his life

MARGERY Dorothy, how can you be so unkind? Oh, I think it's dreadful to say a thing like that when I'm so upset I surrounded him with beauty Everyone knows how much beauty means to me Painting and books and all that sort of thing How about the Czecho-Slovak peasant industries? I organised them It was a revelation of beauty And the Armenian folk-songs Who'd heard of Armenian folk-songs until I discovered them? No one's keener about beauty than I am I'm crazy about it I practically made beauty in Golders Green

DOROTHY [*Soothingly*] I'm dreadfully sorry, darling I didn't mean to hurt your feelings

MARGERY I may not be clever, but if there's one thing I do know something about, it's beauty

DOROTHY You've taught me a lot, darling

MARGERY What's wrong with Charlie is that he's got no sense of humour And I can't do anything about that

DOROTHY It's a pity Alfred can't give him some of his Alfred has almost too much

MARGERY Life's so complicated

DOROTHY Alfred says you're the only person who can do anything now

MARGERY I'm in a frightful position, Dorothy You know how spiteful people are When a woman leaves her husband they say it's because he was a brute, but when a man leaves his wife they say it's because she couldn't hold him. It's so frightfully humiliating

DOROTHY What are you going to say to him?

MARGERY I shall just appeal to his better nature After all, he's a reasonable man He must see that he can't

leave the children just when they're entering the world and need his help and guidance more than ever

DOROTHY Oh, my dear, men aren't reasonable. They're not like women. You surely know that by now. The only way you can influence them is through their emotions. I mean, the great advantage we have over them is that they're weak and sentimental. In your place I'd just be terribly pathetic. I'd cling to him and just cry like a child.

MARGERY I've never been able to cry when I wanted to. You know that. It's always been a handicap. I hate slush.

DOROTHY It's no good saying that now. It's the only thing that gets a man every time. You know what I mean. Flatter him. Be soft and loving and tender. Oh, my dear, I could do it on my head.

MARGERY It's so difficult after all these years. I'm afraid he'd laugh.

DOROTHY Ah, there we come back to the old trouble. It is so hard to know how to take a man who has no sense of humour.

MARGERY I almost think it would be better if you saw him first, Dorothy. I think it would be easier for you.

DOROTHY But, darling, I can't be loving and tender for you. I mean, that's the kind of thing you must do for yourself.

MARGERY Yes, I know, but you can prepare him. I mean, you can tell him that, of course, I'm reserved and don't show my feelings, but you know for a fact that I'm frightfully in love with him.

DOROTHY Yes, I could do that.

MARGERY I daresay you're right. I suppose I haven't flattered him enough. One always forgets how vain men are.

DOROTHY It's fatal when one does All right, I'll see what I can do I'll call him

MARGERY You're a brick, Dorothy I shall be in the garden

[MARGERY goes out through the french window and DOROTHY goes to the door She opens it for a moment, and is lost to sight DIANA slips into the room and tiptoes across it, but she hears her MOTHER'S voice, and slips quickly away

DOROTHY [Outside] Charlie! Charlie! Will you come down? I've got something to say to you

[SHE comes back into the room She takes out her mirror and her lipstick and paints her lips The door opens, and CHARLES comes in He has changed into a lounge suit

CHARLES Here I am

DOROTHY [A trifle solemnly, as though she were speaking of a corpse] I've just been talking to Margery

CHARLES Yes?

DOROTHY She's dreadfully unhappy

CHARLES [Coolly] Peeved and exasperated Not unhappy

DOROTHY You don't know her

CHARLES After nineteen years of marriage? Don't be silly I know Margery as well as it's possible for one human being to know another

DOROTHY She's very reserved

CHARLES A trifle phlegmatic even

DOROTHY What a cruel thing to say, Charlie!

CHARLES Not at all It's not an unpleasant trait in a wife It makes for peace in the home

DOROTHY I wonder if you realise how deeply attached to you Margery really is

CHARLES You wouldn't say she was madly in love with me, would you?

DOROTHY Yes, I would I really would She adores you

CHARLES Don't talk such rubbish You know just as well as I do that Margery doesn't care two hoots for me

DOROTHY No, no, no! She loves you Oh, Charlie, it's such a serious step you're taking

CHARLES [*With a slight change of tone*] And I'm taking it seriously Believe me, my dear, nothing that you can say is going to have any effect on me You're only wasting your breath and my time

DOROTHY I should never forgive myself if I didn't do everything I could to stop you

CHARLES Pardon me, but exactly what business is it of yours?

DOROTHY [*With a little helpless gesture*] Well, you see, I happen to know why you're going.

CHARLES I'm not surprised, considering that I took the greatest pains to explain it to Margery and Alfred

DOROTHY Oh, all that about freedom and not wanting to be a broker? You don't suppose I believe that?

CHARLES All the same it's the truth

DOROTHY [*Softly*] D'you think I haven't got eyes in my head?

CHARLES Very handsome ones, and you make excellent use of them But what have they got to do with it?

DOROTHY [*With a certain coyness*] Well, it's me, isn't it?

CHARLES [*Astounded*] You?

DOROTHY [*With self-satisfaction*] I thought it was

CHARLES Why?

DOROTHY D'you think I haven't noticed how you looked at me? D'you remember kissing me the other night?

CHARLES Not particularly I've kissed you a thousand times

DOROTHY Not like that You may have thought you were kissing me the same as always But you weren't I know After all, it was me you kissed

CHARLES It was quite unintentional

DOROTHY I know That's why it gave you away.

CHARLES My dear Dorothy .

DOROTHY [*Interrupting*] No, no, no, don't Don't speak Let me speak I know so well what you've got to say There's Alfred, your oldest friend, and Margery, my first cousin, and the children—your children and my children Oh, it's all hopeless, hopeless I've seen you brooding over the misery of it, and my heart has bled for you Oh, Charlie, Charlie, you don't have to tell me I know everything

CHARLES Look here, Dorothy, you put me in a very awkward position

DOROTHY [*Acting so well that for the moment she believes every word she says*] And d'you think you haven't put me in an awkward position? What do you think I've been feeling all this time? I'm not a stick or a stone Do you think I could sit there and know that those great, sad, tragic eyes of yours were resting upon me without being stirred to the depths of my soul? Of course, I know that Margery never understood you Oh, my dear, my dear, I've been so sorry for you But, Charlie, we can do nothing What can we do?

CHARLES We can talk not quite so loud

DOROTHY Oh, damn! As a matter of fact there's nobody about

CHARLES But in point of fact why are you saying all this?

DOROTHY Don't you know?

CHARLES I haven't a notion

DOROTHY. Oh, Charles, Charles, what a fool you must think me. I know you love me

CHARLES How?

DOROTHY Intuition D'you think that ever fails a woman in a matter like this?

CHARLES Ah, I'd forgotten that

DOROTHY [*Persuading herself that it is all true*] I've seen your face grow pale with desire when you touched my hand I've seen you bite your tongue in order to prevent yourself from speaking Oh, I know, of course you couldn't speak, it was so brave of you, don't think I didn't realise how brave you were, but this last moment does it matter? I can't let you go without telling you that I know Don't ask me to tell you that perhaps I love you too No, no, no

CHARLES I don't for a moment think you do

DOROTHY I don't know Don't ask me Don't force me to say more than I want to Oh, Charlie, when they came and told me you were going away and in a flash I knew that it was on account of me—oh, what shall I do, I cried to myself It's awful that you should make such a sacrifice for me I can't bear it! I can't bear it!

CHARLES You know, one finds after a time that one *can* bear the sacrifice that other people make for one

DOROTHY I *must* bear it Oh, but you don't know what bitterness it is I know if I were a brave woman I would throw everything to the winds and come with you Don't ask me to do that, Charlie Don't tempt me

CHARLES No, no

DOROTHY You're so wonderful It's no good pretending to be something I'm not I haven't the courage After all I've got a husband who loves me and two children who worship the ground I tread on, and then there's my position in Golders Green I know I'm weak. I know you'll despise me, but perhaps also some day you'll find room in your heart for a little pity

CHARLES I'm sure you're very happy with Alfred

DOROTHY Happy! Happy! Who is happy? Oh, I think life is so sad

CHARLES It has moments when one seems justified in taking a moderately cheerful view of things

DOROTHY Oh, you're bitter I've disappointed you It's no good, Charlie I can't run away with you Be sensible, old boy, what should we live on? Is it true that you'll only have five pounds a week?

CHARLES Quite true

DOROTHY It's no good, darling I know you'll think me hard and worldly, I'm only being cruel to be kind Love can't live on five pounds a week It would be criminal to put it to such a test You do understand, don't you?

CHARLES Quite

DOROTHY It would be different if you had a hundred thousand pounds tucked away in a Swiss bank

CHARLES Quite, quite

DOROTHY I'm not really cynical, you know Only I am a woman, and I know what money means

CHARLES I always think that is one of the most delightful characteristics of your sex

DOROTHY Don't feel hardly towards me, Charlie Don't make my suffering still harder to bear

CHARLES I'm sure you're right

DOROTHY I know I'm right, and one of these days you'll realise it Perhaps in years to come we shall meet again, in Paris or somewhere, and then, who knows? Perhaps you will have forgotten me

CHARLES Oh, no

DOROTHY And perhaps, perhaps I shall say to you, God knows I've suffered, God knows I've tried to do my duty, but there are limits to human endurance Perhaps

I shall say, Charlie, Charlie, we've waited long enough, we have such a little time before us, let us accept the happiness that chance has so mysteriously thrown in our way

CHARLES Now, I think, if you don't mind, I'll just go up and finish my packing

DOROTHY I can't let you go without giving you something to remember me by Charlie, kiss me on the mouth

[CHARLES looks round the room with embarrassment, he is very nervous in case someone should come in by the door or the french window Then he kisses DOROTHY full on the lips She flings her arms round his neck He takes her hands and releases himself

DOROTHY I have given you more than my body, Charlie, I have given you my soul Good-bye Good-bye for ever

[SHE walks swiftly out into the garden, with heroic courage mastering her emotion CHARLES stands for a moment, smiling wryly after her, he passes a finger round his collar, which seems rather tight for him, and then, smiling a little still, walks towards the door to go upstairs Just as he is about to turn the handle the door is opened, he starts as DIANA comes in and almost treads on him

CHARLES Hullo, what are you doing there?

DIANA I've just been hanging about till Dorothy was out of the way I've got something I want to say to you

CHARLES Fire away

DIANA Has she been trying to vamp you?

CHARLES It would be rather late in the day for that

DIANA I bet she thinks you're leaving Aunt Margery on her account

CHARLES You've been listening, Dinah, my dear. Not a very pretty trick.

DIANA Don't be stuffy, darling I don't have to listen at doors to know what Dorothy's saying

CHARLES Mutual sympathy, I suppose One of the disadvantages of a united family

DIANA Poor Dorothy has reached the age when women think every man they meet is in love with them It's such a bore when they get like that It makes them so unpunctual

CHARLES Oh, why?

DIANA You see, they start doing their face and they say, Oh, my God, my face is awful to-day, and they start again, and they go on and on, and by the time they've given it up as a bad job they've kept you waiting for hours

CHARLES My dear, I've still got a few things to pack What was it exactly you wanted to say to me?

DIANA Oh, don't you like general conversation?

CHARLES Is that what it was? I thought you were making a few tart remarks on your mother

DIANA I adore Dorothy I'm sorry for her You know, I think it's so pathetic her gratitude when she can persuade herself she's got off with somebody

CHARLES It's nice of you to be so sympathetic I must bolt now Good-bye, my dear We've had a jolly little chat

DIANA Oh, but I haven't started yet I've been trying to get you alone for the last hour

CHARLES You know, I'm going away to-night

DIANA Yes Would you like me to come with you?

CHARLES What for?

DIANA Company

CHARLES That's awfully sweet of you, but I shall manage all right by myself.

DIANA Won't you be awfully lonely by yourself?

CHARLES After being married nineteen years I'm used to loneliness

DIANA A girl's different from a wife, you know.

CHARLES Quite Even more of a nuisance.

DIANA I'd look after myself I wouldn't be any trouble to you

CHARLES Whatever put such an idea into your head, Dinah?

DIANA I'm so bored at home After all, I'm eighteen, and the time's just flying, and I'm getting nowhere I want to get out into the world and do something

CHARLES That's all right, but a married gentleman in the early forties is hardly the best companion for such an adventure

DIANA Why not?

CHARLES My dear, ancient as I am, I'm afraid it would be difficult to persuade the people we ran across that my relation towards you was simply paternal

DIANA I'm not a damned fool, darling Of course I'd come as your mistress

CHARLES Oh, I see It hadn't occurred to me that you meant that

DIANA I think you must be rather stupid, darling

CHARLES To tell you the truth I don't want a mistress.

DIANA Why not? You're not so old as all that

CHARLES I should prefer any attachments I make to be of a strictly temporary nature

DIANA You could always chuck me if you got sick of me

CHARLES Women are so clinging.

DIANA Don't you think I'm attractive?

CHARLES Very

DIANA And I am a virgin, you know

CHARLES I guessed that

DIANA [*Somewhat hurt*] I don't know why It's just an accident Lots of girls of my age aren't

CHARLES I think it's a pleasing trait in the young unmarried female

DIANA That's rather middle-aged of you, darling

CHARLES I am rather middle-aged, my pet

DIANA Tim is, too

CHARLES What? Middle-aged?

DIANA No, a virgin I think it's rather chic in a boy.

CHARLES It doesn't interest me so much

DIANA He says he's going to wait for Potiphar's wife to make the usual advances to him, and then it'll be such a pleasant surprise for her

CHARLES Or contrariwise Innocence is charming in theory, but in practice experience has many advantages

DIANA You're not going to turn me down?

CHARLES You bet your life I am

DIANA You needn't hesitate because you're afraid I don't realise what I'm up against I should go into it with my eyes open, you know

CHARLES I wasn't thinking of you I was thinking entirely of myself I should be a fool to jump out of a tepid frying-pan into a red-hot fire

DIANA It would be such a lark

CHARLES It wouldn't really I haven't a bean, you know Love can't live on five pounds a week

DIANA Hullo, that sounds like Dorothy Have you been asking her to run away with you?

CHARLES Certainly not

DIANA Swear to God?

CHARLES Cross me heart

DIANA All right As a matter of fact, I've thought of that
You wouldn't have any silly prejudices about my
keeping you, would you?

CHARLES Not at all I trust that in the well-regulated
society of the future that will be the universal practice
Women with their executive ability and natural industry
will toil from blushing dawn to dewy eve and leave men
free to devote themselves to art and literature and the
less violent form of athletics

DIANA Don't talk Listen to what I've thought You know
everyone says I dance divinely I can easily get up stage
dancing and then I'll get engagements at the Casinos
in France and Italy

CHARLES I don't believe there's much money in that, do
you? I've always said that if I was kept by a woman
I'd want to be kept in style

DIANA No, but wait That's why I said I'd get engage-
ments at Casinos A lot of rich men go to them and when
I see that there's one attracted to me I can lure him on,
and then at the psychological moment you can come
in and say, What are you doing with my daughter?
D'you see what I mean?

CHARLES Yes, that's all right in the pictures, but in real
life it always ends you up in jug It's no good, Dinah,
I'd never have the nerve for that

DIANA I suppose that means that you don't want me at
any price?

CHARLES To be frank with you, it does [SHE gives a deep
sigh] Oh, come on, don't sigh

DIANA I'm so frightfully disappointed

CHARLES You'd be bored stiff with me in a month And
where would you be then?

DIANA I could always have left you After all, you're not the only man in the world I don't suppose it would have lasted for ever, but while it did, it might have been rather lovely

CHARLES I think in your place I'd wait till some suitable young man comes along, and marry him You can always see then, you know

DIANA I can't understand why you hesitate I should have thought it such a snip

CHARLES To run away with you? No, it's not my idea of a snip at all

DIANA You haven't got moral scruples, have you?

CHARLES Do you think it would be very nice of me to bolt with the daughter of an old friend and she only just out of the schoolroom, so to speak?

DIANA Everybody's the daughter of someone, and surely it's better to run away with a girl than with an old hag

CHARLES I imagine it's more agreeable

DIANA If you won't have me because you think it's dishonourable or rot like that, I think it's simply foul of you I mean that's just stuffy and frightfully middle-class

CHARLES Oh, d'you think it is?

DIANA Of course I'd never forgive you if it was that

CHARLES I'm sorry

DIANA But if it's just that I don't appeal to you sexually, then I don't mind a bit I mean, it's rotten for me, of course, but that's the sort of thing you can't help, and I must lump it Is that it?

CHARLES My dear, that's not a very nice thing for a man, even a middle-aged one, to say to a girl of eighteen

DIANA Oh, shut up! It never occurred to me that you might . . .

[SHE stifles a little sob]

CHARLES Good God! What are you doing? You're not crying? What on earth are you crying for?

DIANA You see, I'm so frightfully in love with you

CHARLES [*With astonishment*] With me? You never said that before

DIANA I didn't want to appeal to your emotions I wanted to make it practically a business proposition I'm simply crazy about you

CHARLES [*Angrily*] You damned little fool, what rot is this you're talking now?

DIANA It isn't rot I'm madly in love with you.

CHARLES Well, you jolly well stop it. I never heard such nonsense

DIANA I can't help it

CHARLES Yes, you can help it You're just a silly, hysterical, sloppy schoolgirl What you want is a thorough spanking, and by George, if I weren't in such a hurry, I'd damned well give it you myself

DIANA [*Smiling through her tears*] You are rather sweet, you know

CHARLES Upon my soul [*Changing his mood and laughing*] Don't be a little idiot, Diana Fancy falling in love with a funny old thing like me You ought to be ashamed of yourself

DIANA I'm not And I can't help it I've got an awful thing about you I think you're so frightfully attractive

CHARLES Why?

DIANA Well, you have no sense of humour

CHARLES You're not going to tell me that you fell in love with me because I had no sense of humour

DIANA Yes, madly You knew you had no sense of humour, didn't you?

CHARLES I didn't, to tell you the truth.

DIANA People who haven't seldom know it Funny, isn't it? You see, all my family have so much, sometimes it's almost unbearable I love you for not having it You can understand that, can't you?

CHARLES Perfectly But what a bore it would have been if you'd discovered you'd made a mistake when it was too late?

DIANA How d'you mean?

CHARLES Well, you see, our happiness might have been shattered if I'd made a joke

DIANA [*Tenderly*] Perhaps I shouldn't have seen it You know, one often doesn't see the jokes of people who have no sense of humour

CHARLES I think it's just as well not to have taken the risk

DIANA You might kiss me once, will you?

CHARLES Of course, and then I really must see about my packing

[*He goes to her, and is about to put his arms round her She looks at his lips, peering a little, then she passes her forefinger over them and smells it*]

DIANA I wish Dorothy wouldn't use such beastly lip-stick Wipe your mouth, darling

[*She takes his handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes his lips She throws her arm round his neck and offers him her lips, but he takes her head in his hands and kisses her good-humouredly first on one cheek and then on the other She sighs as he releases her*]

DIANA Lend me your comb, will you?

CHARLES My comb? I haven't got one

DIANA Then what do you do when you're out somewhere and want to comb your hair? All the boys I know carry one Darling, I could have taught you so much

CHARLES [*With a glance at his watch*] Where do you suppose Pat and Judy are?

DIANA Judy's in the garden I don't know where Pat is
[CHARLES goes to the french window and calls]

CHARLES Judy. [*To DIANA*] I wish you'd ask Margery to come here

DIANA All right I don't care if you are angry, I think you're terribly attractive

CHARLES Go to hell.

[*As she is going out, JUDY enters*]

JUDY Did you call me, Daddy?

CHARLES Yes I'm just going to have a little chat with your mother I wish you'd go upstairs and see that Johnston is packing my things all right I put everything I wanted on the bed

JUDY Right-ho!

CHARLES And when the bag is ready tell her to put it in the car

JUDY D'you want me to drive you down to the station?

CHARLES No, better let the chauffeur Where's Pat?

JUDY He's locked himself up in his room He's eating butter-scotch He's sulking

CHARLES If butter-scotch makes him sulk, why does he eat it?

JUDY He isn't sulking because he's eating butter-scotch, he's sulking because you said he was a bore

CHARLES I didn't blame him for it I merely stated it as an interesting fact

JUDY You couldn't expect him to like it I didn't either I've been thinking it over Do you know, I've got rather a ghastly suspicion about you, Daddy?

CHARLES Oh! What is it?

JUDY Well, I've got a ghastly suspicion that perhaps you've got more sense of humour than any of us quite realised

CHARLES I? Oh, my dear, what makes you think that?

JUDY I don't know It's made me rather uneasy I mean, it would be rather comic if all this time you'd been laughing at us up your sleeve Isn't it funny? I like you better now than I've ever liked you before

CHARLES I don't know why

JUDY Well, I suppose the fact is that now you're doing the dirty on us you seem so much more human

CHARLES H'm!

JUDY Do I surprise you? You see, you don't know me, Daddy I suppose it's impossible for a father to know his daughter

CHARLES Do people ever know one another?

JUDY I think when they're in love they think they do

CHARLES And are never more mistaken

JUDY Were you in love with Mummy when you married her?

CHARLES Oh yes Crazy about her

JUDY I suppose love can't be expected to last for ever

CHARLES I suppose not I think that's the only real tragedy in life Death? Well, one expects death But when one's in love, one never expects love to die It makes life look such a sell.

JUDY I wonder why it doesn't last?

CHARLES. Habit kills it

JUDY. Dinah and I have often discussed whether it wouldn't be better to have affairs than to marry.

CHARLES There's not much in it An affair is just as tiresome and more inconvenient.

JUDY Pity you're going just now There are a lot of things I should have liked to ask you

CHARLES Why have you never asked me before?

JUDY One can't talk to one's father It's only because I don't look upon you as my father any more that I can treat you as a human being Of course, parents and children bore one another They never talk to us of the things that interest them, and we never talk to them of the things that matter to us

CHARLES If we ever meet again we must try to forget our unfortunate relationship You will be an engaging young woman I've run across by chance, and I shall be an elderly gentleman in reduced circumstances who once knew your mother

JUDY I daresay we shall find we have quite a lot to say to one another

CHARLES For my part I should like to tell you that I shall be delighted to renew the acquaintance we've so unexpectedly made It's been charming to meet you

JUDY Daddy, why are you going away? It's for your soul's sake, isn't it?

CHARLES That sounds rather pretentious and high-falutin', doesn't it?

JUDY Does that matter? Just for once and within these four walls.

CHARLES Well, perhaps it is I have so few years before me It seems a pity to waste them Have you ever had an awful lot of letters to write and only ten minutes to catch the post? You don't write the most important ones from the standpoint of eternity, but only the important ones to you Perhaps they're quite trivial, making a date or answering an invitation, but they are all you have time for The others must go to the devil. I only have time now to do what I urgently want to do.

JUDY You've got your chance You'd be a fool not to take it I don't blame you In your place I'd do what you're doing

CHARLES You're a good girl, Judy

JUDY You've given me my chance, too I never wanted to be a young lady Coming out and going to parties, getting married and going to parties I want to go on the stage

CHARLES Are you prepared to work? It isn't just doing your bit in a play and then going to supper at the Savoy It's a whole time job

JUDY Oh yes, I'll work

CHARLES Well, be natural, that's the chief thing

JUDY That ought to be easy

CHARLES It isn't It's the result of infinite pains It's the final triumph of artifice And remember that society only looks upon you as a freak and the moment you're out of fashion drops you like a hot potato Society has killed more good actors than drink It's only your raw material Let the footlights, at least spiritually, always hold you aloof These are the last solemn words that a father whispers in his daughter's shell-like ear as he is about to leave her for ever

JUDY Why for ever? When I'm a celebrated actress with a princely salary and you a broken-down old reprobate, I shall be always pleased to offer you a home in my palatial flat

CHARLES That's sweet of you Here is your mother Nip along, darling, and when my packing's finished come and tell me

JUDY Right-ho! Bless you, Daddy Have a good time.

CHARLES Same to you, my pet.

[*SHE slips out of the door as MARGERY comes in from the garden* CHARLES *goes towards her and takes her hand*

Come and sit down, Margery

MARGERY Is it true you're going away to-day?

CHARLES Yes

MARGERY You're deliberately breaking my heart

CHARLES My dear, for the first time in our lives we're going to have a serious talk It'll be so much easier if we say nothing that we don't mean

MARGERY But I love you, Charlie

CHARLES No, dear, that's not true If you still had for me that hungry craving of the soul they call love, I think it's possible I shouldn't have the courage to leave you

MARGERY I've never loved anybody in my life but you

CHARLES I daresay not, but that isn't quite the same thing

MARGERY I don't know what you mean by love

CHARLES I think you do You were in love with me once just as I was in love with you, and one doesn't forget

MARGERY You can't expect me to be the same as I was nineteen years ago It would be absurd if I were still the love-sick girl I was then

CHARLES And extremely tiresome.

MARGERY Love isn't everything I mean, there's companionship and mutual confidence and all that I've always had a great affection for you I often thought what a picture we made of a happy and domestic couple Why, I don't believe we've even had a squabble for ten years

CHARLES I wonder it didn't make you a little uneasy Doesn't it strike you that two people must be profoundly indifferent to one another if they never find occasion to disagree?

MARGERY I don't know how you can be so ungrateful
Don't you realise that if we got on so well it was entirely
due to my wonderful tact? Believe me, it wasn't always
so easy You were very different when you came back
from the war

CHARLES We were both very different Or perhaps we
weren't different at all, but we'd been separated for five
years and we saw one another for the first time as we
really were

MARGERY I don't know what you mean by that I'd
developed a lot during the war I wanted to do my bit,
and I don't see how anyone can deny that I did it Most
people thought I was so much improved

CHARLES Out of all recognition, my dear We were
strangers to one another We had to start making one
another's acquaintance all over again from the beginning
I don't think we liked one another very much

MARGERY I was a little disappointed in you, I don't mind
admitting it Fortunately I have imagination I re-
member how disgusted I was when once you dropped a
piece of bread and butter on the ground and picked it
up and ate it as though nothing had happened But I
said, that's the war, and I made allowances

CHARLES It's very difficult for two people who are not in
love with one another to live together It's funny what
trivial things get on their nerves

MARGERY It wasn't trivial at all It was deeply significant
of the change that had taken place in you You'd lost
all your beautiful idealism. Why, you weren't even
patriotic any more You drank too much and your
language was filthy

CHARLES. I suppose my nerves were a bit groggy You
were very patient with me.

MARGERY I made up my mind that I must be When the Armistice came, the war was over for you, but I had to go on doing my bit just the same And there were thousands of women in England like me I've been a good and faithful wife to you I think I have the right to some consideration

CHARLES Perhaps we've both been too good and faithful You know, of course, that the Tasmanians, who never committed adultery, are now extinct

MARGERY No, I didn't And I'm not interested in the Tasmanians I think it's frightfully callous of you to mention them when I'm so upset

CHARLES You mustn't think I'm not sorry to cause you annoyance

MARGERY Did you say annoyance?

CHARLES I did I think your vanity is hurt by my leaving you I don't believe your heart is much concerned

MARGERY What's the good of my telling you I love you if you don't believe a word I say?

CHARLES I shall believe you if you speak the truth

MARGERY How can I speak the truth when I'm taken by surprise like this I don't know what the truth is The whole thing has come as such a shock to me It never occurred to me that you weren't absolutely satisfied I always looked upon ours as an ideal marriage I don't know what more you wanted

CHARLES Like Queen Victoria I was not amused

MARGERY You can't expect marriage to be amusing If it were, the law wouldn't protect it and the church wouldn't sanctify it Do you think women find marriage amusing? They've been bored stiff by it for a thousand generations Half the women I know are so bored by their husbands that they could scream at the sight of them.

CHARLES Why do they stick it?

MARGERY Because everybody else sticks it Because marriage is like that They get used to it Because it always has been and always will be their only respectable means of livelihood And because of the children I think it's awful that you should condemn your innocent children to poverty just because you want to have a good time

CHARLES I'm giving you fifteen thousand pounds

MARGERY It isn't even yours to give

CHARLES Morally, of course, it belongs to my creditors, but they have no legal claim to it

MARGERY How can tainted money bring one any enduring benefit?

CHARLES If you feel uneasy about it, you are at perfect liberty to hand it over to them, but I tell you frankly that I shall stick to the five thousand I'm keeping for myself

MARGERY Are you sure your creditors couldn't get it by going to law?

CHARLES Quite

MARGERY If I only had myself to think of, for the sake of your honour I would give it to them without a moment's hesitation But my children have a prior claim on me For their sake I shall certainly keep it

CHARLES I think you're very sensible

MARGERY But how you expect me to live on seven hundred and fifty a year, less income tax, I can't imagine

CHARLES I don't see why you shouldn't be very happy.

MARGERY The position of a woman whose husband has run away from her isn't very nice

CHARLES Tell your friends that I've had a nervous breakdown, and had to go abroad.

MARGERY You know what people are. They always think the worst. They'll say there's a warrant for your arrest, or that you've gone off with a chorus girl. You can't blame them. It's natural they should. And I almost wish it were true. That would at least be normal. I could understand that.

CHARLES Do you really think that I'm called upon to go on working indefinitely in order, not to provide my wife and children with the necessities of existence, but with luxuries they can very well do without?

MARGERY It's what one naturally expects a man to do.

CHARLES And what about life? Where does that come in?

MARGERY I don't understand what you mean. That is life. The ordinary man gets his pleasure by providing his family with the things they want. I mean, that's his normal existence.

CHARLES And do you think it's worth while?

MARGERY Why, of course it is. Otherwise everybody wouldn't do it. After all, it's no hardship to work. It's the only thing that brings enduring happiness. There's beauty in doing your duty in that state of life in which a merciful Providence has been pleased to place you. And after all, beauty is the thing that counts. There's beauty in the commonplace round of every day.

CHARLES Not much in selling stocks and shares.

MARGERY Oh, yes, there is. I mean, we must take a spiritual view of things. I've always been frightfully keen on that, and it's been a bitter disappointment to me that you were incapable of entering into that side of my life. My Czecho-Slovak peasant industries and the Armenian folk-songs and so on. Dorothy was only saying to me just now, I practically made beauty in Golders Green.

CHARLES You're a remarkable woman, Margery.

MARGERY No, I'm not, but I'm not a fool, and no one has ever called me a prig I daresay I've thought about these things a little more deeply than you have. I'm an idealist I think it's so ugly to be selfish You can only get permanent satisfaction from life if you live for others I mean, it's only by forgetting yourself and living only for Pat and me and Judy that you can hope to achieve any real happiness I don't suppose you'll listen to me, there are none so deaf as those that won't hear, but one day you'll confess I was right It's in self-sacrifice that a man fulfils himself It's in giving all he has to those who are near and dear to him that he solves the riddle of life and makes out of his poor little existence a thing of beauty

CHARLES Margery, you're priceless

[JUDY comes in]

JUDY Daddy!

MARGERY Run along, darling Your father and I are talking

JUDY I only came to say that everything was packed, Daddy Johnson is putting your bag in the car

CHARLES Oh, good Then nothing remains but for me to say good-bye

MARGERY But you're not going now?

CHARLES Yes.

MARGERY But you can't I haven't said half the things I wanted to say I haven't begun yet We must thresh the matter out

CHARLES My dear, we've discussed love, beauty, work and the economic situation What else is there?

MARGERY It's not fair, I mean, it's so fearfully sudden If I'd only had time to get used to the situation, perhaps I shouldn't have minded so much.

CHARLES My dear, you must look upon me like a fellow-passenger on a ship that you've seen a lot of during the trip. But the ship reaches port and you and he go your separate ways.

MARGERY Oh, don't talk like that. I always think ships are so terribly pathetic. I shall cry.

JUDY Yes, have a good cry, Mummy, it'll do you good.

MARGERY I know I could get you to stay if I could only think of the right things to say. I was so unprepared.

CHARLES My dear, you'd never think of the right things to say, because in your heart you don't want me to stay. I shouldn't go with such a kindly feeling towards you if I didn't feel that there's somewhere stirring in you the thrill of a new adventure.

MARGERY It's no good crying over spilt milk, is it?

CHARLES Good-bye, Margery.

[He kisses her on the cheek. She gives it to him listlessly, as she has done for years.]

MARGERY It seems so strange your going like this. I simply don't know what to make of it.

JUDY Johnston said you didn't want your tails, but I told her to pack them.

CHARLES Oh, why? They'll be quite useless to me.

JUDY You never know. You might want to be a waiter.

CHARLES Thoughtful child. That had never occurred to me.

MARGERY Charliel. You can't be a waiter.

CHARLES Why not? When I'm up against it I'll take any job I can get. I'm prepared to be a bar-tender, a mason, a house-painter or a steward on a ship.

MARGERY How can you? Think of the people you'll have to mix with

CHARLES I have in point of fact a particular fancy to be a commercial traveller

MARGERY Oh, Charlie, how *infra dig* What will you travel in?

CHARLES Romance

MARGERY How impractical

JUDY But what fun

CHARLES Good-bye, Judy

JUDY Good-bye, darling Bless you!

[*He kisses her and goes out quickly*]

MARGERY Judy, I don't feel at all well.

THE END